

A PATHWAY OF HEALING THROUGH THE ART
OF CREATIVE WRITING FOR RURAL
CONGREGATIONS

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ABSTRACT

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by
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Project context is Reedsville United Methodist church. Past and/or current trauma prevents members from expressing how trauma has impacted them. If the members participate in a workshop on cultural arts expression, then they will gain confidence to begin articulating how they are suffering from trauma. Project implementation lasted seven weeks. The data collection methods included pre-project and post-project surveys, creative writing assignments, group discussions, and journaling. Because the members participated in a workshop on cultural arts expression, they gained confidence in articulating how they have suffered from trauma.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Reedsville United Methodist Church for their support and encouragement throughout my doctoral program. I am grateful to my doctoral mentors and focus group colleagues, both past and present, for their prayers and guidance. Most of all, I want to thank my family for all the ways they have shown their unwavering belief in me and my work.

DEDICATION

This doctoral project is dedicated to my husband, Dave, my children, Morgan and David, and the members of Reedsville UMC who have found the courage to seek healing through writing.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Alcoholics Anonymous
BOCES	Board of Cooperative Educational Services
CPS	Child Protective Services
GEN Z	Generation Z
LIHSA	Long Island High School for the Arts
NA	Narcotics Anonymous
NEV	New English Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NYU	New York University
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
UMC	United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

Writing has served as a powerful instrument for creating a wide range of works, including songs, stories, plays, treaties, expressions of romantic interest, and newspapers. It is also a valuable tool for expressing emotional pain and addressing traumatic experiences. When writing groups are formed, individuals can discover their voice through the written word, allowing them to share feelings that may be difficult to express otherwise, which can ultimately lead to healing.

In the Biblical Foundations chapter, Genesis 1:26–28 serves as a reminder that every individual is of immeasurable worth because they are made in the image of God. Family trauma can have a profound impact, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and potentially causing them to lose their sense of identity. Seeking divine guidance is essential for understanding one's identity; this understanding can significantly change how a person views themselves and their relationship with God.

The Genesis text plays a crucial role in this search for identity. The rural church can empower its members by providing a space where each person can learn to embrace their inherent worth and express their truth creatively. Expressing emotions through creativity nurtures personal growth. This passage highlights the importance of finding one's purpose and using unique talents and creativity to contribute to God's plan.

In the Historical Foundations chapter, examining the life of William Cowper is a crucial aspect for this project, as it highlights the importance of childhood and adolescent

development and the effects of unresolved trauma. After experiencing the loss of his mother at a young age, Cowper faced neglect from his father and did not receive care for his grief and emotional suffering. When children and adolescents do not process trauma, it can lead to significant challenges in adulthood.

Writing serves as a valuable outlet for individuals to express themselves. The rural church can foster writing communities that enhance fellowship and encourage creative expression. The relationship between William Cowper and John Newton exemplifies the power of collaborative writing, as both used the written word to articulate their deepest thoughts, serve God, and share their faith with others.

Collaborative creative writing sessions provide individuals with the opportunity to reflect on their emotional and spiritual struggles, ultimately fostering a healthier community. Church-based writing workshops create a safe space for participants to express their emotions without fear of judgment. Language arts can be a powerful tool for connecting with one's inner self and spirituality. Imagine if rural churches served as safe havens for those dealing with brokenness and family trauma, allowing them to find understanding and peace through writing.

In the chapter on Theological Foundations, the introduction of the theology of theopoetics highlights the importance of creativity and imagination in connecting with God. Theopoetics is a hermeneutical approach that employs poetry and other art forms as tools for understanding and experiencing the Divine. This concept can be beneficial for pastoral care, spiritual formation, and gaining insights into God's mission, particularly for those who have faced trauma.

Theopoetics invites individuals to explore and deepen their faith in meaningful ways. Using language arts to express past traumas can be transformative for churchgoers, allowing them to rewrite their personal narratives through God's grace. This process can enhance their worship experience within the faith community. By incorporating theopoetics into liturgical practices such as poetry and prayer, believers can bear witness to the presence of Jesus and engage with God's creativity. This fosters a deeper connection with the Divine during worship.

Emotional trauma can hinder a person's mission work, growth, and understanding of the Gospel by affecting their mind, body, spirit, and voice. Unresolved trauma can create barriers for people connecting with faith communities in mission, leading to spiritual isolation. One way for the church to help individuals voice their experiences of trauma and gain a deeper understanding of their role in the church's mission is by facilitating cultural arts workshops. Art therapy is an effective means of processing emotions imaginatively.

In the Interdisciplinary Foundations chapter, the use of creative writing in art therapy is examined as an aid for trauma recovery for both clergy and laity. Art therapy can help those who have experienced trauma rediscover their identity and reconstruct their narrative by reshaping painful memories. This process is grounded in biblical principles and can aid in personal growth, connection within a faith community, and developing Christ-like attributes.

Writing exercises are often a part of art therapy sessions, as they can help individuals explore their self-image and their connections to the world and God. Art therapy emphasizes collaborative writing, drawing inspiration from the bonds between

writers like William Cowper and John Newton. By utilizing creative writing, art therapy can help individuals connect with God and inspire those they are writing with. While writing can be a valuable tool for promoting happiness, it is essential to remember that it is not a substitute for mental healthcare. However, art therapy has improved overall well-being by fostering positive emotions, relationships, service, and meaning.

In West Virginia, faith communities that implement organic recovery programs can enhance the community in ways that are unique to the arts, such as stimulating self-reflection and imagination and acknowledging the mysterious nature of the journey of faith. At Reedsville United Methodist church, there is a need for exposure to the cultural arts as a way for individuals to process and express brokenness. Members who participate in a workshop on cultural arts expression will gain confidence in articulating their trauma. The next chapter will examine the ministry context and journey that led to the development of the creative writing workshop at Reedsville United Methodist Church.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

Rural communities offer vast and beautiful landscapes. Still, the same isolation that brings its beauty can also be detrimental to emotional health, particularly for church members who suffer from unspoken family trauma. As a church pastor in rural Preston County, I cannot ignore the alarming statistics reported in my community. As a result, it is crucial for the church to create spaces for open dialogue and healing, offering support to those who may otherwise suffer in silence.

Youth living in rural communities are more likely than urban or suburban youth to abuse drugs and alcohol earlier in life.¹ Untreated emotional trauma often leads to destructive behaviors. Rural communities often lack the necessary resources to provide treatment for individuals who are struggling with mental health issues as a result of family trauma. In a call to action addressing the disparities in rural mental health, the Journal of Clinical and Translational Science stated:

Approximately one-fifth of the US population live in a rural area, and about one-fifth of those living in rural areas, or about 6.5 million individuals, have a mental illness. Though the prevalence of serious mental illness and most psychiatric disorders is similar between US adults living in rural and urban areas, adults residing in rural geographic locations receive mental health treatment less frequently and often with providers with less specialized training, when compared to those residing in metropolitan locations. The reasons underlying this mental health treatment disparity are well documented and include reduced access to

¹ Natalie Hoeg, “Substance Abuse in Rural Vs. Urban Areas,” *Addiction Center Blog*, *Addiction Center*, <https://www.addictioncenter.com/community/substance-abuse-rural-vs-urban/>.

providers and limited availability of specialty mental health care in rural areas, lack of trained mental health providers and care coordination in rural medical care, and underutilization of available services.²

As a result, youth who do not receive proper treatment for emotional trauma may engage in destructive behavior or become adults who do. To address this issue, innovative treatment centers and services are needed to help those who are struggling with unprocessed trauma. In rural communities, when individuals are unable to process and articulate trauma, they are likely to develop low self-esteem, depression, and addiction. One effective way to process and express past and present emotional trauma is through the language arts.

Introduction

This chapter aims to analyze the ministry of Reedsville United Methodist Church in Reedsville, West Virginia. This community is an integral part of Preston County, and the chapter will explore how the pastor's life experiences and interests seek to meet the needs of the congregation and the surrounding community. Additionally, this chapter will serve as a foundation for a Doctor of Ministry Project that focuses on the relationship between the pastor and the community she serves. The Preston County community faces various challenges, including generational poverty, mental distress, and substance abuse. The pastor's leadership skills and past experiences can aid church members in bringing hope and healing to the community. This chapter will examine the introduction of

² Dawn A. Morales, et al, "A Call to Action to Address Rural Mental Health Disparities," *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science* 4, no. 5 (May 2020): 463-467.

innovative recovery program centered around cultural arts, particularly creative writing, to articulate past or present trauma.

Context

Reedsville United Methodist Church (UMC) has a rich history of dedicated members seeking to grow in Christ and meet the community's needs. In 1908, the cornerstone was first laid for the building. Reedsville UMC has become a strong presence within the community and continues to gather people who grow, serve, and proclaim God's word.

Reedsville UMC is located in Reedsville, West Virginia, surrounded by agricultural land. The town has a population of around 600 people and is in Preston County, where the total population is 34,216 residents.³ Reedsville is a relatively safe and beautiful community where one can find solitude or raise a family. However, despite the beauty, there is a poverty issue. According to a study of the socio-economic characteristics of Preston County in 2019, 25.21% of its residents were living in poverty.⁴ It is evident within the community that there are families living in poor conditions. Out of those residents living in poverty, 12.79% were working part-time and still living in poverty, while 1.97% were working full-time and still experiencing poverty.⁵ Unfortunately, the poverty rate in Preston County has significantly increased since the

³Community Needs Assessment Annual Update 2022.
<https://ncwvcaacorp.net/blog/2022/05/13/2022-ncwvcaa-community-needs-assessment-and-covid-report/>

⁴ Community Needs Assessment Annual Update 2022.

⁵ Community Needs Assessment Annual Update 2022.

outbreak of COVID-19, although the county has a long-standing issue of generational poverty.

Family instability plays a significant role in perpetuating generational poverty. In 2019, 66% of unmarried women with children in Preston County were living in poverty, and 9% of children living there had parents who lacked secure employment.⁶ A lack of parental stability and financial security leaves children the most vulnerable. As of 2020, 18% of children were living in poverty in the same county.⁷ Again, it is important to note that these statistics have significantly increased due to COVID-19 and the rise of substance abuse in Preston County.

The primary causes of poverty in Preston County are a lack of education beyond high school, substance abuse and addiction, and generational poverty. The school system exhibits strong effects of poverty. In the 2022-23 school year, Preston County had the second-highest dropout rate in the state.⁸ In small towns, sports can bring people together and instill a sense of pride. However, at Preston High School, the school spirit is lacking. Pep rallies are infrequent, and the football team has not won more than one game in years. Despite being one of the larger high schools in West Virginia, their sports teams struggle to compete against schools in their division. The coaches who mentor teenage boys often chew tobacco, which sets a poor example. The basketball team did not win a single game during the 2022-2023 school year, and the mascot, a Knight, does not reflect

⁶ Community Needs Assessment Annual Update 2022.

⁷ Community Needs Assessment Annual Update 2022.

⁸ "ZoomWV," *West Virginia Department of Education*, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://wvde.us/zoomwv/>.

the school's spirit. Instead, Preston High feels more like the Tin Man, left to rust by the roadside.

The most recent statistics from the West Virginia Department of Education stated that there were 122 homeless students in Preston County during 2018-2019 school year.⁹ Homelessness in Preston County is defined as “students in transitional/emergency shelter, sharing housing of others, living in cars, parks, campgrounds or abandoned buildings, and living in hotels/motels.”¹⁰ The effects of living in an unstable environment contribute to low academic scores, as well as problem behaviors and social consequences for youth.

Oftentimes, children and teenagers who are living in an unstable home environment, primarily when raised by a single parent, are more likely to suffer from sexual abuse. Statistics from the West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information & Services recorded that in West Virginia, nearly 82% of all sexual assaults were committed by someone known to the victim.¹¹ Often, sexual assault victims are in a relationship with his or her abuser, even though this relationship varies in degree. Statistics show that 46.6% of assaults were committed by an acquaintance, 7.4% by an intimate partner, and 27.6% by 'other' family members.¹²

In West Virginia, teenagers are more vulnerable to sexual abuse, specifically teens who are raised in a low-income and unstable environment. Statistics reveal that 64.8% of victims were juveniles under the age of 18 in West Virginia, with the most

⁹ Community Needs Assessment Annual Update 2022.

¹⁰ Community Needs Assessment Annual Update 2022.

¹¹ West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information & Services, 2000
<https://www.fris.org/SexualViolence/Statistics.html>.

¹² West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information & Services, 2000.

frequently reported age being 15.¹³ The statistics only reflect reported abuse. Many young victims often decide not to disclose or report sexual trauma due to feelings of shame and guilt.

Substance abuse in Preston County continues to affect the overall spiritual, physical, and emotional health of the community. Data indicates that, aged 12 years to 20, 31% of residents used alcohol, and 25.5% took part in binge drinking.¹⁴ Substance abuse is eliminating valuable members of society. The effect of underage drinking is damaging to the mind, body, and soul. Youth who engage in drinking alcohol regularly exhibit problems in school and social settings, physically and oftentimes, legally. Statistics reveal that 40% of individuals aged 12 and up had a great risk of having over five alcoholic drinks once or twice a week; 6.8% were alcohol dependent or abusing alcohol; and 6.4% needed treatment for alcohol use but did not receive it.¹⁵

Preston County bears the scars of alcoholism. Commonly, youth who drink become adults who drink. Fifteen percent of adults in the county reported that they drink alcohol excessively, and 42% of automobile deaths involve alcohol in Preston County.¹⁶ As a community, we must address the root causes of self-destructive behavior and work to eliminate them.

The opioid issue has become a pandemic in the United States. In 2021, Preston County experienced six drug-related deaths related to opioids, fentanyl, heroin, cocaine,

¹³ West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information & Services, 2000.

¹⁴ Community Needs Assessment Annual Update 2022.

¹⁵ Community Needs Assessment Annual Update 2022.

¹⁶ Community Needs Assessment Annual Update 2022.

or methamphetamine.¹⁷ In Preston County, there are limited drug and alcohol rehabs, and residents suffering from alcohol and substance abuse are not provided with extensive drug rehabilitation. Reedsville UMC hosts a support group—Together We Can—for family members who have loved ones struggling with addiction. There are a few churches within Preston County that host AA and NA meetings. However, the drug crisis continues to rise. Repeatedly, the root cause of substance abuse is family trauma.

Church members are not exempt from the impacts of the surrounding culture and trauma. Often, when they lack a way to express their experiences of trauma, individuals may either avoid confronting it or engage in self-destructive behaviors. Family trauma can take many forms, with its effects stemming from situations such as divorce, family dysfunction, or even death. As a result, it is crucial for the church to foster a compassionate environment where members feel safe to share their struggles and begin the healing process.

On one of my first Sundays as the newly appointed pastor at Reedsville United Methodist Church, the congregation was singing "When We All Get to Heaven" during the closing hymn. As I looked out into the crowd, I noticed a member weeping uncontrollably. I immediately walked over to her, and she looked at me and said, "I do not do this; I do not know why this is happening." In other words, she was communicating that she did not usually share her innermost struggles and felt embarrassed to express her deep pain. Later, I discovered that she was a recent widow. Her husband had passed away a year ago, and she was still grieving and struggled to

¹⁷ Community Needs Assessment Annual Update 2022.

articulate her feelings. As she silently mourned within, she found it difficult to express the weight of her sorrow, unsure of how to begin to heal.

There is a pressing demand for creative and effective recovery programs to support both children and adults in Preston County. It seems that services and opportunities to engage in cultural arts are currently insufficient in the area. The local community would greatly benefit from exploring fresh avenues for emotional expression for past or present trauma. By expanding these opportunities, the church can foster healing and resilience, offering individuals a meaningful path toward recovery and growth.

Ministry Journey

I am a native of Long Island, New York. My siblings and I were raised by our single mother, Linda. My mother struggled her entire life with mental illness and substance abuse. My mother's mental health and substance abuse kept her from maintaining regular employment. As a result, my mother had many different jobs, and we moved around frequently. We moved seven times before I entered the fourth grade. Sometimes, we stayed at a friend's home; other times, church folks opened their homes to us, and once, I even remember sleeping in the car. The instability of an unhealthy family home life created a stressful environment for me, as well as a sense of insecurity and lack of control over our lives. My mother deeply desired to provide security for her children, yet her mental illness and substance abuse created an obstacle in reaching her goal.

My father was briefly involved in our lives, picking us up every other weekend. When my father would arrive on his designated Friday to pick us up, I felt secure

knowing my weekend would be spent at my Italian grandmother's house. I loved spending time at my grandmother's, and I wanted my mother and father to join me around the table. I longed for the security of living in a stable family. Yet, deep down, I knew that both of my parents were struggling in their own ways, and that the security I desired could not be forced

As a child, I did find security in a dependable friend of the family, a man named, Robert. Robert loved my mom and desired to care for her and her children. My mother was never attracted to Robert, yet it was Robert who she always called when she was in need. Robert paid for our groceries, utility bills, and school supplies. Robert provided a sense of stability in my life. He appeared to be a good family friend. While my love for my father was unwavering, I saw Robert as a father figure. However, as I would discover later in my adult life, Robert was a child predator, and I experienced his abuse while living with my mother.

When I was eight years old, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, which resulted in a mastectomy. My mother changed after her surgery. It was almost as if she felt her flesh persecuted, a part of her identity removed. As a result of her mastectomy, she began to self-medicate more intensely with drugs and alcohol. My mother would take us with her to the local pubs. While we played the pinball machines, she would get drunk at the bar. The first drink I ever drank was my mother's screwdriver. I was eight years old. I remember lifting her glass to my lips as she looked at me and said, "Just a sip." When she got too drunk to drive, Robert always appeared, ensuring we all got home safely.

Alcoholism has been the root of dysfunction in my family. Despite my grandfather becoming a recovering alcoholic later in his life, my mother never forgave him for giving her his alcoholic gene. She resented the fact he drank the entire time he raised his family until my grandmother had finally had enough of his abuse and divorced him. The effects of his drinking left a legacy that all his children followed. All my mother's siblings are recovering alcoholics, each one walking their path of self-destruction before eventually reaching sobriety. My mother and grandfather often got into loud disagreements with blame and hate. I have been told that the night my grandfather died, my mother and grandfather had gotten into an argument. My mother ended the argument with what would be her last words to her father: "Drop dead." Later that evening, my grandfather died of a heart attack. After my grandfather's death, there was a more radical change in my mother's mental health. She not only dove deeper into drugs and alcohol, but she could no longer hide her mental illness.

Child Protection Services became interwoven into my childhood. Many times, I was questioned by my teachers and principals about my home life. Sometimes, CPS would show up at school to ask me about my home life. Eventually, when my mother's addictions and mental illness became apparent to others, my brother, sister, and I were sent to our father, who had just recently remarried. My father gained legal custody of us, but it was our stepmother, Anne, who had the task of raising us. As my father worked away, we kept it a secret when our stepmother started abusing us. I now believe my stepmother suffered from depression, and she was also a closet drinker. Eventually, my sister wrote a letter to her second-grade teacher describing our abuse, and CPS was once again contacted.

Shortly after, we became children of the state of New York. The court appointed a legal guardian for my siblings and me. By this time, my mother had been admitted into a mental institution. She was officially diagnosed as schizophrenic. I had not seen or heard from her in years. But through everything, I continued to pray to God to be reconnected with my mother. I still longed for security, and I prayed to God to heal both my parents.

Throughout my childhood and teenage years, I moved around to different homes. While I always loved writing, during my freshmen year of high school, I became more passionate about creative writing, especially poetry. My passion for writing caught the interest of an English teacher who told me about the Long Island High School for the Arts (LIHSA) and encouraged me to apply. It was a BOCES program (Board of Cooperative Educational Services) that would allow me to spend part of the day cultivating the art of creative writing. With the teacher's encouragement, I submitted some poems to the creative writing department at LIHSA. I was accepted into the program entering my 10th-grade year. I attended the creative arts school in the morning and returned to my high school in the afternoon for my academic classes. Learning the art of poetry was a welcome and wonderful experience.

My creative writing teacher, Adele, had a tremendous influence not only on my writing but also on me. She introduced poets such as Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Sharon Olds, Galway Kinnell, and Robert Lowell. She introduced me to the art of confessional poetry. Adele would often invite me and a few other students to attend poetry readings on Long Island and in New York City. I won several poetry contests in high school and led poetry readings at the LIHSA. I read at many poetry events on Long Island alongside many well-known and established poets, such as the late William Matthews, Robert

Pinsky, and Diane Wakoski. I won many scholarships for my writing, including a National Endowment for the Arts award.

Writing poems, particularly confessional poetry, calmed my spirit and allowed me to express my voice. I felt a sense of security and purpose when I wrote. In many ways, writing poetry became a pathway to peace. I would attend creative writing sessions where we read, critique, and encourage each other's poetry. Creative writing became therapeutic. Through these sessions, I discovered the power of community, where sharing our words not only nurtured our own growth but also strengthened the bonds between us.

When I was fifteen, I received the unwelcomed news that my mother had died of cancer at the age of forty-two. When the cancer returned to her body and covered her remaining breast, my mother kept it a secret and refused to receive treatment. The inevitable result was the spreading of cancer. As it did, it spread to her lungs like tar. The news of my mother's death filled me with much anger toward God. I vowed never to pray again. At this time, I began searching for something to replace my faith. I turned to alcohol.

My poetry, written during my teenage years, reflects my soul-searching and anger toward God. After I walked away from God, I became highly self-destructive. I drank heavily and began experimenting with drugs. In New York, one can travel down many paths of spirituality. I traveled those paths, thinking I would find rest for my soul. Instead, I only discovered my soul had a thirst that could not be quenched. As my life began spinning out of control, I continued to cling to my poetry writing journal writing. My poems were dark, yet poetry allowed me to put words to what was heavy on my heart. My poems became a voice to the pain I was suffering.

After high school, I attended Nassau Community College on Long Island. I enjoyed college and became involved in the poetry scene on campus. I became the editor of the poetry section of our school newspaper and the poetry editor of the college's literary magazine. I also ended up becoming president of the poetry club. It was the best of times. I had several poems published in poetry magazines. I was invited by the late William Matthews to audit his graduate creative writing class at New York University (NYU) and got accepted into the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference at Middlebury College in Vermont. However, still devoid of a relationship with God, I continued struggling with unrest in my soul. I was still drinking, and my alcoholism eventually led me to drop out of college.

At age twenty, I decided to travel to Savannah, Georgia. On my way to Georgia, I stopped in West Virginia. I was introduced to West Virginia through my oldest brother Carmine Jr. He had attended college in Salem, West Virginia, where he met his first serious girlfriend, Tina, who was a native of Middlebourne, West Virginia. They fell in love, married, and moved to New York. Throughout the years of their marriage, I became close to Tina. I often accompanied her when she traveled back to her hometown for family reunions. I loved West Virginia – the hills, the creeks, and the one-lane dirt roads. During one of the trips with Tina, I met her niece, Susie. Susie and I became close as we faithfully wrote letters to each other. This led me to this stopover in Middlebourne, West Virginia, where I wanted to visit Susie. I planned to travel to Savannah, which was put on hold when the stopover lasted longer than anticipated.

Susie introduced me to a man named Dave, who lived near her West Virginia hometown. I developed a relationship with Dave, but I planned to continue from West

Virginia. I was still struggling with the unrest in my soul. I did not know the hard-hearted person I had become. I remained in West Virginia for a year, drinking and smoking, and I stopped writing poetry. Dave wanted our relationship to become more serious, but I initially hesitated. His persistence and kindness, however, eventually won me over, and despite being in a state of unrest and immaturity, I said yes to his proposal of marriage.

On June 23, 2000, Dave and I got married at the courthouse in Moundsville, West Virginia. Our daughter, Morgan, was born on January 16, 2001. Our son, David Jr. was born on April 16, 2002. Despite having a wonderful family, I found myself sinking into depression and bitterness. I was constantly angry with my husband and longed for a change of scenery, feeling as though running away was the only escape. I fell into self-destructive patterns once again. Then, God intervened. A friend suggested I visit a church and speak with a priest. Still angry with God, the idea of stepping into a church was the last thing I wanted to do. But in my desperation, I walked to the nearest church, which turned out to be Sistersville First United Methodist Church.

I began meeting regularly with the pastor, and our discussions sparked a deep interest in my soul and, more importantly, the souls of my children. I came to the realization that the meaning of life begins with seeking God and building a relationship with my Creator, which began to awaken something within me. Soon after, I surrendered my life to Jesus and asked for forgiveness, giving Jesus control of my life. I began faithfully attending Sistersville First United Methodist Church, where I was embraced with open arms by the church family. As my relationship with Jesus Christ grew, my thinking started to transform. I discovered a new sense of purpose and love—love not only for others but for myself as well. For the first time, I felt like I truly belonged to a

family—the family of God. With my church family, I found safety, security, and a deep sense of belonging.

I started writing again. I wrote poems reflecting my new identity. As a child, my identity was shaped by circumstances that were beyond my control. My identity shaped how I acted socially, emotionally, and spiritually. When I surrendered my life to Christ, I started surrounding myself with other Christians, kind brothers and sisters, who helped me understand who I was in Christ. They molded that and lived it out, and that began to shape my identity. My poetry began to reflect this understanding of how my identity was not based on what other people thought of me but on what God thought of me. As I grew in Christ, I began to discover that I had gifts, talents, and abilities that could be used to bless other people. I started writing Christian skits for the women's group to perform at church. I wrote poems about sanctification, the struggles of marriage, and the gift of motherhood. Poetry once again became the voice of my soul. Shortly after, through an extremely dramatic event, I admitted my alcohol abuse and began recovery. I am now twenty years sober.

Having a clear sense of identity is essential because it can inspire actions that you might not have otherwise taken. Six years after my conversion, I felt called to pastoral ministry. In 2010, I attended licensing school and was appointed as a part-time local pastor to two rural churches in West Virginia: Lazear Chapel and Wick United Methodist Churches. The people at both churches taught me what it truly meant to be a pastor. Together, we served, growing into the hands and feet of Christ. We gathered regularly for prayer, fasting, and Bible study, and through it all, God was at work, bringing about transformation in each of us.

When I started seminary at United Theological, I was appointed as a part-time student pastor to Dallas and Sand Hill UMC in West Virginia. After graduating from United Theological Seminary on May 16, 2016, I became a provisional member of the West Virginia Conference of the UMC. Due to a breakthrough prayer initiative, Dallas and Sand Hill UMC had grown in spirit and numbers, and I could move to a full-time appointment and complete my three years of residency with both churches. I was ordained on June 16, 2019, with my husband, children, and clergy sponsors standing with me. On July 1, 2021, I was appointed pastor of Reedsville UMC in Reedsville, West Virginia.

Synergy

There is a need in Reedsville, as well as the entire county, for groundbreaking recovery treatments and services to reach children and adults who are suffering from family trauma. The lack of cultural arts is a disadvantage to the community. Youth and adults require safe and creative avenues to process and express themselves. When a community invests in arts and culture, it can reap many benefits. These benefits can include increased productivity and overall well-being. Exposure to the cultural arts has a positive impact on communities. An article from *Michigan Radio's State of Opportunity Project*, an organization that studies children from low-income families, stated:

The two-year study by researchers from the School of Social Policy & Practice at the University of Pennsylvania found that low-income New York City residents with more access to cultural resources experience better education, security, and health outcomes. That includes a 14% decrease in cases of child abuse and neglect, an 18% decrease in the serious crime rate and a 18% increase in the

number of students scoring at the highest level on standardized math and English tests compared to low-income communities with fewer cultural resources.¹⁸

Creative writing is one pathway to communicate past or present fears, areas of weakness, places of temptations, and ways one has overcome and endured trials.

Gathering with people to write, specifically poetry, is a therapeutic tool. In my current context, there is a strong need for church members to articulate their emotions in holistic ways. Writing poetry with others creates an atmosphere where recovery, accountability, and healing can occur. A proposed project, formed by my spiritual journey and current context, is to develop structured poetry sessions that can occur within a church gathering and, even more effectively, occur within schools, so that youth and young adults suffering from unspoken trauma can feel safe to express themselves. Recovery can happen through poetry.

The generational mindset within Preston County and the lack of motivation to do better are apparent within the school systems. Many students attending Preston High School battle with depression and anxiety. Uncovering the root cause of emotional trauma is needed. The rise of suicide amongst Generation Z (Gen Z) can no longer be ignored in our nation. According to Preston Memorial Hospital: “West Virginia has historically had a higher suicide death rate than the nation, and the death rate increased over the last decade. Preston County has also historically reported a higher death rate,

¹⁸ Paulette Parker, “Access to Arts and Culture May Improve Outcomes in Low-Income Communities,” State of Opportunity, Michigan Public Radio, April 7, 2017, <https://stateofopportunity.michiganradio.org/families-community/2017-04-07/access-to-arts-and-culture-may-improve-outcomes-in-low-income-communities>.

generally mirroring statewide trends.”¹⁹ In Preston County from 2016 to 2020, there were 31 suicides, with a higher number occurring among males (20) versus females (11).²⁰ In 2019, more than 11% of West Virginia high school students reported suicide, an increase from 7.5% in 2013.²¹ Our youth desperately need someone to listen to their voices.

The rise of addiction and substance abuse has created strongholds within Preston County. There is a lack of rehabilitation programs within our county. Innovative treatments must be explored. I regularly attended the support group *Together We Can*, which is for families with loved ones struggling with addiction. I have often listened to parents' frustrations due to our area's lack of effective treatment facilities. Many of these parents appear hopeless. The statistics in Preston County show that reckless behavior involving substance abuse starts as young as twelve years old. In my experience, when a child begins to self-destruct, he or she is trying to manage or overlook the family trauma he or she has suffered.

Writing poetry helped me articulate my deepest fears and hopes in my spiritual journey. Language arts became a way for me to find my voice. Many of the poems I wrote as a youth were a way of processing grief. When I created poetry, writing offered me the freedom to express everything I needed to say and things I did not realize needed to be said. The poetry I write now as an adult has become, in many ways, a process of mediation, reflection, and confession. My friend and colleague, Dr. Reverend Carolyn

¹⁹ Preston Memorial Hospital 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment.

²⁰ Preston Memorial Hospital 2022 CHNA.

²¹ Preston Memorial Hospital 2022 CHNA.

King, has proposed this question: “What if we are most like our Creator when we are creating?”

The Bible is filled with rich poetry. It has been said that as much as one-third of the Old Testament is written in poetry. God must be a poet. God certainly understood the power of poetry. In Robert Alter’s book, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, he points out the poetic system within the Old Testament. He also draws attention to the first two-line poem found in the Bible, Genesis 2:23, when Adam identifies his partner:²²

Then the man said,
 “This at last is bone of my bones
 and flesh of my flesh;
 she shall be called Woman,
 because she was taken out of Man.”²³

Adam’s delight in his newfound companion is named and spoken in biblical verse. Genesis 2:23 is the first evidence of a shift in the writing style to that of poetry. The second example of biblical poetry in the Old Testament is also found in the first book of the Bible, Genesis 4:23–24. The setting of the poem is centered around Lamech and his two wives:²⁴

Lamech said to his wives:
 “Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
 you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:
 I have killed a man for wounding me,
 a young man for striking me.
 If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold,
 then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold.”²⁵

²² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (La Vergne, TN: Basic Books, 1985), 5.

²³ Genesis 2:23 English Standard Version (ESV).

²⁴ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 5.

²⁵ Genesis 4:23-24 (ESV).

The Bible is an extraordinary work of literature, but it is much more than that. The poetic expression of the Word of God is both tangible and life changing. In the book of Job, the narrative of his story begins with a conversation between God and the Enemy but then transitions into a poetic style. Job, the poet, gives voice to his anguish in the confrontation he has with his friends and the blame they place on him for the suffering he endures. Robert Alter writes:

Job's poetry was an instrument for probing, against the stream of the Friends' platitudes, the depths of his own understandable sense of outrage over what befell him. God's poetry enables Job to glimpse beyond his human plight an immense world of power and beauty and awesome warring forces.²⁶

The art of poetry enables one to find meaning in life's struggles and connect with God's purpose. The art of biblical poetry is intricately threaded throughout the Bible. Poetry is found in the book of Proverbs, the Song of Songs, in the minor and major Prophets, and most famously, in Psalms.

There is a purpose for poetry. When a reader reads a poem, they delve into the poet's innermost thoughts, emotions, struggles, and soul. In return, the reader may connect with and discover an appreciation of the poet's perspective; the poem reaches and touches the reader in ways a poem can only do. There is a song between the poet's words and the reader's ear that transcends the pages. Poetry can be a beautiful experience.

Robert Alter notes how Barbara Herrnstein Smith observes in her book, *Poetic Closure*, the reader's response when discovering biblical poetry. She writes: "... we know that we are in the presence of poetry and we respond to it accordingly ... expecting

²⁶ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 110.

certain effects from it and not others, granting certain conventions to it and not others.”²⁷

Poetry has an enchanting effect on its readers, often leading to a thought-provoking stream of questions that arise from the enchanting melodies and lyrical flow of words.

Engaging in the art of writing or reading poetry can be a transformative and all-encompassing experience. Many find that the act of indulging in poetry serves as an effective means of healing. When used in a church setting to help members articulate their brokenness, creative writing exercises can explore the enduring strength of Jesus that grants true and lasting restoration.

Prior to his ascension, Jesus made a promise to grant the Holy Spirit. This Spirit would then empower believers to become witnesses and live their lives in the same way as Jesus. As individuals embrace their identity in Christ, they develop an increasing thirst for holiness. The objective, as Christians, is to emulate the image of Jesus. The more we become like Jesus, the less we resemble our trauma-scarred selves. Christians are charged with producing fruit as followers of Christ. Jesus conveyed to his disciples: "By this, my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”²⁸ When healing occurs, fruitful living follows.

Confession holds significant importance in bearing fruit. It acts as a cleansing agent for the soil of our souls, enabling us to grow and produce the fruits for which we were created. Recovery through poetry involves writing confessional poems. In the poetry sessions, I plan to introduce confessional poets like Emily Dickinson, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath and biblical poets such as King David, who shared his

²⁷ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 5.

²⁸ John 15:8 New English Version (NEV).

confession in Psalm 51. Confession takes place when we honestly reflect on our transgressions. It leads to repentance, which, in turn, leads to joy.

The practice of creative writing can be a powerful experience. When our true thoughts, feelings, and reflections are expressed, self-awareness occurs and uncovers the root of our pain. In my experience, transformation will happen when prayer is added to the practice. James, the half-brother of Jesus, would agree with this practice as he wrote:

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.²⁹

My skills in creating a safe and prayerful atmosphere and passion for poetry can aid in recovery through creative writing programs. The poet of Proverbs writes:

“Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.”³⁰

Through this Doctor of Ministry Project, I hope to discover ways in which the art of creative writing can cultivate a space for reflection, fellowship, and healing for rural congregations.

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene

1.
I would find her at night, naked,
lying on a musty mattress,
in the yellow light of a broken lamp,
a damp, black Bible between her breasts,
my mother, waiting for Jesus, her lover.

²⁹ James 5: 13-16 (NEV).

³⁰ Proverbs 16:24 (NEV).

2.

I would sit on the edge
of the tub
as if it were a riverbank,
washing her feet.
Her wet hands pulled my face to hers,
her fingers laced each strand of my hair,
till it parted straight—

She wrapped a towel around my waist,
held her drink to my lips,
as she tipped and let the liquor
touch my tongue like the water that drips
from the lip of the basin.

3.

My sister and I would hide
under coffee tables,
our bodies wrapped like a vine
around the wooden legs.
We watched her body,
dance like a chant in the night—

Then, fall to the floor,
like a deer struck
by a truck in the woods.
We heard the men outside,
searching with flashlights,
shouting her name in the dark.

4.

After her death, burial,
and words of new life,
I found and read my mother's death certificate,
she was forty-two and mentally ill
and no one knew what to do with her.
We were sent like FedEx to our father,
who was still fed up with our mother,
and all that she had waited for—

For the predawn darkness,
a jar of customary spices,
for the heavy stone to be removed
from the garden tomb.³¹

³¹ Unpublished work written by the author of this research.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Contemporary society is facing several challenges that negatively affect emotional health. These challenges include mass shootings, racial tensions, polarizing news, and social media, which have led to a significant increase in suicide, depression, anxiety, and ultimately, destruction of self and creation. Hans-Ruedi Weber captured this vicious cycle that humanity often finds themselves in with a poem “Reverse Creation” written by Bernard Backman poem, an American songwriter and poet:

In the end, man was destroying his heaven, called earth. The earth was beautiful until man moved over it.

And man said, let there be darkness, and there was darkness. Man said the darkness was good and he called his darkness— security. And there was no evening and no morning on the seventh day before the end.

Then man said, let there be National governments to divide and control us in our darkness. Let there be leaders to lead us in our darkness so we may know our enemies. There was no morning on the sixth day before the end.

Then man said, let us create an army to control men’s bodies and minds and let us extend our darkness all over the earth. Let us create rockets and bombs to kill faster and easier and at a distance for we must protect our security. And there was no morning on the fifth day before the end.

And then man said, let us travel to the moon and planets and stars for we must extend our security— while other men starve on earth we will reach for the stars— and there was no morning on the fourth day before the end.

Then man said, let us create escapes for ourselves. Let us have drugs and pep pills, good balls, tranquilizers, advertisers, opiates, barbiturates, L.S.D., S.T.P., S.E.X., Compōz— for we are troubled by reality since it disturbs our security. And there was no morning on the third day before the end.

And then man said, let us create God in our own image lest some other god compete with us. Let us say God thinks as we think, hates as we hate, and kills as we kill. And there was no morning on the day before the end.

And on the last day there was a great noise on the face of the earth, and there was silence. The blackened earth rested to worship the one true God. And He saw all that man had done. And in the silence of the smoldering remains— He wept.¹

Throughout human history, the collective voice of humanity and creation has often been heard crying out for relief, whether through self-destructive behavior or in the silence of words that cannot be articulated. It is a testament to the innate human desire for change and the recognition that something is amiss in the world. Rural settings experience a higher suicide rate than the national average. In Appalachian America, residents are experiencing a surge in drug and alcohol abuse. West Virginia has registered the highest count of opioid-related overdose fatalities in the United States of America.²

Unfortunately, resources and treatment centers to address these issues in rural areas are not readily available. The lack of the cultural arts and innovative treatment resources in rural settings often results in neglect and oversight of individuals engaging in self-destructive behaviors, leading to an increase in sickness, divorce, or death. Children and adults affected by such brokenness can often feel abandoned and unheard.

¹ Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Living in the Image of Christ* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1986), 13.

² Shelly Moore Capito, “Fighting Drug Epidemic,” Issues, Shelly Capito Moore United States Senator for West Virginia, <https://www.capito.senate.gov/about/issues/fighting-drug-epidemic>.

Consequently, people often question faith and whether healing is even possible. The Christian community is not immune to such feelings. As a result of family trauma, laypeople may not have the confidence to articulate what they are suffering from, which can impact their relationship with God and others, causing them to suffer in silence. Church members can even become disillusioned with their identity in Christ. In rural communities, people tend to quickly label and judge others for generations, creating a lasting stigma after a traumatic event. This is because news travels fast in small towns.

When a person experiences trauma and is unable to process or communicate their past and present struggles, they may develop a sense of purposelessness. This can lead to negative behaviors and serve as the root cause of issues related to self-esteem and identity issues. Too often, broken people can only see their own brokenness. Author and pastor, Reverend Dr. Michael Beck writes in his book *Painting with Ashes*: “When we are trapped in our own agony of isolation, fear, and resentment, we act out from our brokenness and bring harm to others.”³ This highlights the importance of church members recognizing and addressing trauma in a healthy, constructive way. The book of Genesis provides a message of purpose, order, and intentionality to help individuals find meaning, fulfillment, and healing amid brokenness.

The scripture selected for the Biblical Foundations supporting this doctoral project is Genesis 1: 26–28:

Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humans in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue

³ Michael Beck, *Painting with Ashes* (Plano, TX: Invite Press, 2021), 42.

it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

In the creation story, God made humankind after creating the animals, and humans are believed to be God’s most prized work of art, uniquely created in His image. Humans are the only creatures created in God's image. This means that as image-bearers, humanity shares God's creative character and is given stewardship over creation. Unfortunately, humanity's image has since been tarnished by sin, and it has failed to partner with God's ongoing creative work in the world. The creation story foreshadows Jesus as the New Adam, who restores the *Imago Dei* and establishes a sense of purpose among men and women. This purpose is directly linked to creation, recreation, and one’s identity in Christ.

This passage delves into three main themes that form the biblical foundation of my doctoral research. The first of these themes concerns the issue of identity. Many individuals grapple with the question of their existence and understanding their identity. Even lifelong church members can experience identity crises when trauma has been suppressed. The creation narrative in Genesis offers a poignant reminder to those who lack clarity in their uniqueness to seek guidance from the Creator. Those who bear God's divine image are infinitely valuable. Realizing this truth can significantly alter one's outlook on one's sense of self, others, and God.

The selected biblical passage has a second recurring theme emphasizing that every human has a purpose. Unspoken trauma within the church can hinder the laity's understanding of its role as image-bearers and how they contribute to the Body of Christ. The God who creates has allowed humans to express their creativity by participating in

the act of creation. Just as Adam and Eve were invited to work in partnership in the ongoing creation process by being fruitful and taking care of the earth, so are the members of Christ's body given purpose to bear fruit. Utilizing one's creative abilities to articulate the deep emotional afflictions of the soul can yield significant fruit for the health and wholeness of individuals in a rural church setting.

Finally, this chapter will explore the concept of healing through the lens of becoming a new creation. The book of Genesis offers insight into the challenges of human life, such as the origin of trauma and sin in the world and God's plan to redeem it. The creation story leads to a new creation in Jesus, as God plans to return everything to its intended purpose. In this journey of redemption, all are invited to experience transformation, where healing and restoration reflect God's ultimate plan for wholeness.

Genesis

As the title explains, the book of Genesis is about new beginnings. In ancient times, often, the first word of a text would become the title. The Hebrew title comes from the book's first word, "*beresit*," which means "in the beginning."⁴ Genesis is also a translation from the Greek of the LXX, meaning "source" or "origin."⁵ The book of Genesis describes the beginning of God's relationship with humankind, beginning with Adam and Eve.

The first chapter of Genesis is structured in a series of concise sentences, with each creative command consisting of several components:

⁴ William Sanford, David Allan Hubbard, Frederic William Bush, and Leslie C Allen, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1996), 15.

⁵ Sanford, Hubbard, Bush, and Allen, *Old Testament Survey*, 15.

- an introductory word of announcement, “God said ...” (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26).
- a creative word of command, “let there be” (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14-15, 20, 24, 25).
- a summary word of accomplishment, “and it was so” (1:3, 7, 9, 11, 15, 24, 30).
- a descriptive word of accomplishment, “God made ...,” “the earth brought forth ...” (1:4, 7, 12, 16-18, 21, 25, 27).
- a descriptive word of naming or blessing, “God called ...,” “God blessed” (1:5, 8, 10, 22, 28 – 30).
- an evaluated word of approval, “God saw that it was good” (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).
- a concluding word of temporal framework, “It was evening and it was morning, day ...” (1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31).⁶

It is fascinating to observe the structure and sequence of commands that God speaks. In each proclamation, God appears to be creating art or directing a crew of construction workers. However, it is God who commands, creates, and constructs. Jack Miles, in his book *God: A Biography*, poignantly describes this timeless structure of God at work:

The scene has no narrator. It is not presented as a vision vouchsafed to some prophet privileged to witness God at work. Yet the effect is that of eavesdropping or spying. We come upon work in progress, and what strikes us about the worker is that, though he talks to himself, he does so without the slightest hesitation. He is not musing. He has something precise in mind, and each stage in his project leads without haste but with extreme economy and directiveness to the next.⁷

There is an obvious structure to the Genesis story, as well as precise order and purpose in God’s creativity. God speaks, God calls, God blesses, and God creates.

Finally, the text has been beautifully compared to a form of liturgy. It captures the essence of the meticulous ordering of the text while highlighting a specific movement with repetition, similar to that of a hymn or a psalm. The text has a poetic and musical quality shaped in its language. Overall, the creation story is a perfect example of how repetition and order can enhance the impact of a text, much like a poem.

⁶ Kenneth O Gangel, Max E Anders, and Stephen J Bramer, *Genesis* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 18.

⁷ Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1996), 26-27.

Literary Genre

Several ancient narratives contain creation accounts. Many creation stories, including the flood account, share similarities to Mesopotamian literature. The similarities found in ancient Near Eastern literature are few; however, three essential parallels occur: the image of the primeval state as a watery chaos, the basic order of creation, and the divine rest at the end of creation.⁸ This creation story is unique in that it stands apart from other extra biblical creation accounts due to its emphasis on the existence of only One Creator God. While other accounts feature a variety of gods, the bible's creation story emphasizes the singular, all-powerful God who created the universe and all that is in it. This essential truth sets the biblical account apart and makes it unique.

The Mesopotamian account introduces the god of water, the god of land, the god of the sun, the god of fish, and so on. In contrast to the monotheism found in Genesis, the other ancient accounts feature gods that symbolize the different forces of nature.⁹ In the Genesis narrative, God is the only true Creator who creates all of nature, including the planets, stars, and moon. God is the force. God owns all these other so-called gods. This is one of the reasons why when God introduces himself to the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh in the book of Exodus, God does so by controlling the Egyptian gods. One of the most powerful Egyptian gods was the sun god “Ra.” God proves Pharaoh’s Egyptian sun god does not have any real power when God darkens the sky. Every single plague brought on the Egyptians is a direct correlation to God introducing himself as the One True Creator.

⁸ Gangel, Anders, and Bramer, *Genesis*, 19.

⁹ Gangel, Anders, and Bramer, *Genesis*, 21.

In one of the Mesopotamian accounts of human creation, humans were mass-produced, sprouting from the ground due to the work of hoe and brick. Another account suggests human origin came to be because gods complained about how hard life was. These creator gods are found to be struggling in the creation process, even cutting themselves to bring forth creation.¹⁰ The God of Genesis does not struggle or bleed to create; God speaks.

In the book of Genesis, names are used as a literary tool. In the first chapter of Genesis, the name used for God, repeatedly, is Elohim. The name Elohim is used thirty-two times in the first chapter of Genesis.¹¹ God is Elohim. This is evident in the creation story. In his book *Names of God*, Nathan Stone explains how “the opening statement of the scriptures contains the name *God*. The Hebrew word from which this word *God* is translated is Elohim. The name Elohim, however, contains the idea of creative and governing power, of omnipotence and sovereignty.”¹² The name Elohim is also written in plural form. This is an exciting detail because the ancient Hebrews believed in only one God. In Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." In a world where polytheism was the norm, the Hebrews differentiated themselves by believing in only one true God. However, in Genesis, God says, "Let us make humans in our image." Christians interpret this as evidence of the Trinity, where God the Father speaks the world into existence, the Spirit of God hovers over the waters, and the Word,

¹⁰ John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate*. (Downers, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 72.

¹¹ Nathan J. Stone, *The Names of God in The New Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1944), 10.

¹² Stone, *The Names of God in The New Testament*, 11-12.

Jesus, becomes flesh and lives among us. In John 1:1, we read: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John explains that the Word is Jesus, who is with God in the beginning. John further states 1:14, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Therefore, one can understand the plural pronouns used to describe God in Genesis 1:26, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness," referring to the Trinity. God wants to be known as Elohim, the All Powerful and Creative Author. Unmistakably, this creation account in the book of Genesis is extraordinarily unique. Only in the biblical narrative is Elohim seen as a Supreme Creator who creates everything for the good of humankind.

Detailed Analysis of the Text

To fully understand the significance of Genesis 1:26-28, it is important to examine the text preceding it. Genesis 1:1 is a remarkable introduction by God. The first words of the bible, "In the beginning," introduce the creation of the heavens and the earth by Elohim, marking the start of human history. God is introduced by showcasing the marvel of existence, emphasizing heaven's intricacy and the earth's purposeful design. God is established as the Creator right from the beginning.

The introduction of God is of significant importance because it answers one of the most significant questions any human can ever ask: Where did everything come from? Where did human life originate? The first verse of Genesis informs the reader that their existence is not a matter of chance. It is not a result of randomness but rather a specific purpose and design. God introduces himself as the Creator. When reading the first

chapter of Genesis, it is almost as if God can be pictured sitting at a desk with a pen and chapter in hand, meticulously writing the story of creation. Alternatively, God can be seen as a potter with a lump of clay in his hands, molding things into existence. God creates the heavens and the earth as if he is an artist standing before a blank canvas with a paintbrush in hand. Author Jack Miles adds, "One does not speak commandingly to oneself. It is rather as if a carpenter reaching for his hammer were to speak the word hammer aloud. Compliance with such a "command" is not even remotely at issue."¹³ God begins by forming creation with the most beautiful creative commands, the scope of which is unfathomable to the human mind.

Genesis 1:2 provides a detailed account of the pre-creation state, where "the earth was without form and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the earth." This verse paints a picture of God holding all the raw materials in his hands, with the earth being formless but full of potential. The following verses describe the potential that each day of creation brings, as if one were watching a recording of each day's progress.

When referring to "days," there are varying interpretations among believers. Some interpret the creation days as literal 24-hour periods, while others believe they represent epochs or ages that could span hundreds of millions of years. Ultimately, the timing and methods of God's creation are solely determined by God himself and may differ from one creation day to another. The creation process is a journey.

The book of Genesis tells how light and darkness were created and separated to form on the first day, followed by the separation of water to create the vast sky and sea

¹³ Miles, *God: A Biography*, 26.

on the second day. On the third day, plant life emerged as the sea was separated from the dry land. God's creation continued to build on itself with the emergence of the skies, day, water, and land. Though almost everything needed for life was present after the first three days of creation, God had more to create. The fourth day brought the magnificent sun, moon, and stars, followed by various birds and fish on the fifth day. On the sixth day, an assortment of animals filled the land before God created something most unique.

According to the biblical account in Genesis 1:26-27, humanity is uniquely created in the image of God:

Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humans in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (NRSV)

The universe, with all its vastness and the intricate atoms that make up all matter, is already a creation of incredible beauty. God creates nature and offers a breathtaking diversity of creatures, each with unique characteristics. The celestial bodies, from the sun and moon to the countless stars, are all part of the divine handiwork. But there was a unique moment when God chose to fashion a being in his image.

Identity

Many individuals spend their lives searching for a sense of identity, unaware that they were created in God's image. In rural communities, many individuals are trapped in a cycle of generational abuse, poverty and lack of economic resources and cultural arts. This can cause individuals to strongly identify with their current circumstances, leaving

them unsure of their potential and sense of self. When people are broken, their identity becomes fragmented.

What actions is the rural church undertaking to tackle the identity crisis currently faced by people in the community? John Briere and Catherine Scott, in their book *Principles of Trauma Therapy: A Guide to Symptoms, Evaluation, and Treatment*, emphasize the importance of social responses, resources, and support. This includes accepting and not blaming victims when they disclose their trauma, providing a caring and nurturing environment, and making other agencies available that may offer further help.¹⁴ The church must unite and harness the divine light within each community member, enabling people in the community to voice the truth that is being suppressed by trauma in their inner being.

Human experience is often a complex and challenging journey, filled with pain, heartbreak, and adversity. Sadly, some individuals may endure violence and abuse, whether it be from a family member or within institutions like the church. These traumatic experiences can leave a person feeling unable to express themselves and disconnected from their own identity. Many people in contemporary society contemplate life's most profound questions, such as "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?" Questions about the existence of life are not new. One can find similar inquiries in the book of Psalms, where the psalmist asks such questions as: "What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:4). Genesis serves as an excellent starting point for this quest for answers, emphasizing the origin of identity:

¹⁴ John Briere and Catherine Scott, *Principles of Trauma Therapy: A Guide to Symptoms, Evaluation, and Treatment* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015), 31.

“So God created humans in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

In the verse that comes after Psalm 8:4, Weber draws attention to what the original Hebrew states: “Yet [you have] made [that being] a little less than God” (Psalm 8:5).¹⁵ Weber adds how the translators of the Old Testament in Greek were taken aback by this expression and thus translated it: “You have made the human being little less than the angels.”¹⁶ Discovering one's true identity is a fundamental aspect of personal growth. Childhood trauma often stunts this growth, leaving many seeking the answers to the question, “Who am I?”

No faith system has a higher view of humanity than Christianity because every person uniquely reflects the image of God. Therefore, as image-bearers, all humans have intrinsic value and dignity. The answer to understanding and appreciating one's identity is provided in Genesis 1. In his book *The Image Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation*, Ryan Peterson states that understanding oneself is found when one moves towards one's Creator. He explains,

God, in giving humanity the identity ‘image of God,’ leaves humanity without a self-directed definition or goal. Humanity is intended to move toward God. Humans can only know themselves truly in light of God as God is for the world. To use a different idiom, one could even say that God disciplines humanity through God's Being-for-the-world to the end that humanity will image God in its being-in-the-world.¹⁷

¹⁵ Weber, *Living in the Image of Christ*, 49.

¹⁶ Weber, *Living in the Image of Christ*, 50.

¹⁷ Ryan Peterson, *The Image Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 2016), 78.

Every person is a child of God. This means that every person possesses distinctive qualities that set them apart from animals and other creations. These qualities include the ability to reason, think, feel, worship, and create.

Since every person is created in God's image, their relationship with God is unique. However, this does not suggest that humans are divine, but God is the pattern. H. Ray Dunning, a Wesleyan theologian, explains that being made in God's image is a crucial aspect of the *Imago Dei*. Dunning writes: "One of the important aspects of the nature of the *Imago Dei* is reflected in the precision of the biblical references. They do not say that humans *are* the image of God, but they were made *in* the image of God."¹⁸ When individuals carry unexpressed emotional pain from past abusive experiences, they may start to believe the falsehood that they are worthless. However, every individual must realize that all human life has value and purpose, if for no other reason than humans alone are created in the image of God.

In Genesis 1:27, the concept of humans bearing the image of God is reiterated: "So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." This means that both males and females are created in the image of God, emphasizing their equal value and equality. The text indicates that God creates with intention, purpose, and meaning.

Hans-Ruedi Weber's book, *Living in the Image of Christ*, explores the concept of human identity. Weber stated that the writer of the letter to the Ephesians provides a significant answer to the question of our human identity. According to the writer, we are

¹⁸H. Ray Dunning, *Reflecting the Divine Image: Christian Ethics in Wesleyan Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 41.

God's poiēma, which means God's poem.¹⁹ We are created in Christ Jesus for good works, as mentioned in Ephesians 2:10. According to Weber, our true identity lies, therefore, in the fact that God made us his artwork: sculptures molded out of living flesh, kinetic art, which is to become active.²⁰ The creation story is a beautiful depiction of God's creative abilities, portraying God as an artist who brought forth the wonders of human existence with boundless imagination and power. In the famous quote about our existence, Weber beautifully states: “Therefore, our whole way of life is thus to become a poem that communicates something of the design God envisioned for us and creation.”²¹ How would one’s self-perception shift if they viewed themselves as a priceless work of art, a poem sung from the very lips of God? To view God as an artist is easy when observing a sunrise or a sunset, but how often does the church view God as a writer and themselves as God’s poetry?

The challenge for the church is when members of a faith community carry unhealed trauma that they may not feel confident or safe enough to share with others. This can negatively impact their self-perception and distort their understanding of their identity. Creating a safe and supportive environment for individuals to articulate their trauma and find healing is essential. By acknowledging and addressing unhealed trauma, faith community members can move towards a sense of wholeness of self and a stronger connection with their faith and community.

¹⁹ Weber, *Living in the Image of Christ*, 51.

²⁰ Weber, 51.

²¹ Weber, 51.

Purpose

The Genesis text provides the answer as to how humans are on this planet. The text also answers the purpose of human existence. God created humans to establish a relationship with them. In the book *Theology for Liberal Protestants: God the Creator*, author Douglas Ottati reflects on the relational aspect of creation:

For creation, the gift of life means that our relationship with God embraces the continuing and often ordinary flow of life. Our relationship with the divine is not restricted to matters of “salvation,” it is also resident in the everyday. Again, the gift is given to a person as a living being with all other living beings together.²²

The first step in understanding one's purpose is comprehending one's relationship with God and others. God created humans to be in life-giving relationships with God and with one another. This is a gift given to Adam and Eve.

In Genesis 2: 18–20, the whole story of creation is explained in Genesis 1: 26–28:

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner (NRSV).

After God spoke things into existence on previous days, there was a turning point in the creation story. God declared everything good until Adam was alone. This marked the first “not good” of creation. According to the Genesis story, Adam was unhappy because he did not have a companion. God noticed Adam's dissatisfaction and realized that something was not good. Therefore, some may argue that God saved the best for last. God created Eve, a partner for Adam.

²² Douglas Ottati, *Theology for Liberal Protestants: God the Creator* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 226.

The realization of being created in the image of God to establish a relationship not only holds a profound purpose on the individual level but also permeates and influences all other forms of interpersonal relationships. Understanding this purpose for laypersons suffering from unspoken trauma can bring about a meaningful change within a religious community. Christians can tap into their purpose and meaning by using their gifts and creative abilities to serve and assist one another, which can foster life-giving relationships. Surviving family trauma can profoundly alter a member's relationship with their church family. The church is a family, and this truth changes how members perceive and support one another. Church members need each other, and understanding this reality can give a sense of purpose to those previously disconnected from the church.

Another purpose for individuals who bear the image of the Creator is the Christian duty to utilize language to uplift and encourage those within faith circles. The purpose of words is not to inflict harm upon others. The book *The Power of Talk: How Words Change Our Lives*, states:

Words by themselves will never break our bones, but they can and all too often do help create ways of thinking that would influence someone to believe that breaking your bones is a good idea. And since words are capable of affecting the way we understand the world, then perhaps the pen (and our spoken or signed words) truly is mightier than the sword.²³

Words have power, whether written or spoken. Church members should always keep in mind that words are powerful and can have a significant impact, especially when interacting with those who have experienced trauma. Christians have the ability to positively influence the lives of others by using language to uplift and encourage.

²³ Felecia M. Briscoe, Gilberto Arriaza, and Rosemary C. Henze, *The Power of Talk: How Words Change Our Lives* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012), 163.

The comprehension of one's creation in the image of God is a crucial factor in discovering a definitive purpose for the relationship between humankind and the natural world. This tri-fold relationship pattern is mirrored in the Old Testament with the understanding of Israel's identity and the importance of their relationship with God and the land.²⁴ Many Christians overlook their relationship with the environment and the natural world. In Genesis 1:26–28, God gave Adam and Eve the purpose of naming the animals, highlighting the importance of their role in creation. In an article written by H. van der Westhuizen, he connects the Spirit of creation to human relations, in that he writes: “The creative Spirit thus holds that which is fleshly together inasmuch as that which is fleshly is given a share in the Spirit that is of life. In this way, the Spirit creates differentiated interrelations.”²⁵

Nature has an abundance of beauty, particularly for those residing in Appalachia. The rolling hills of the countryside can evoke a newfound appreciation for the land in which one lives. Many poems and songs have been written about the hills of West Virginia. Even international students are familiar with the classic song "Take Me Home, Country Roads" by John Denver. In rural areas of America, it is common for Christians to live out their purpose in maintaining and taking care of the country roads.

Love is the force behind God's creation, giving humans countless reasons for purpose and meaning in life. The bible states that God is the source and embodiment of love. Julian of Norwich discovered God's love for the smallest of objects in the form of a hazelnut that she held in her hand. She famously said: “At last, and always will, because

²⁴ Dunning, *Reflecting the Divine Image*, 47.

²⁵ H. van der Westhuizen, "The Spirit, Justice and Beauty?" *Acta Theologica*, 2020, suppl.29 (January 2020): 40.

God loves it; and in the same way, everything has its being through the love of God.”²⁶

Despite the word “love” not being found in the creation story, love is a strong theme throughout the text. Dunning notes how love can describe this relationship: love for God, love for the other person, and love for the earth.²⁷

Unfortunately, due to sin, the love that originated in the garden has been fragmented in numerous ways. Sin is the force behind all suffering in creation. Experiencing emotional or physical trauma from someone who should provide unconditional love will negatively affect one's view of God and disrupt relationships, both for children and adults. The power behind someone who physically or emotionally abuses others is inherently evil.

This necessitates a response from the church. In their guidebook for pastors and congregations dealing with violence and trauma, Laurie Kraus, David Holyan, and Bruce Wismer discuss the nuances of responding to those affected by natural disasters versus those affected by human-made disasters. They point out that responding to violence requires a different focus and set of skills compared to natural disasters or industrial accidents. Both natural and human-made disasters can disorient, destabilize, and engulf victims in chaos, leading them to feel hopeless and trapped. While natural disasters and industrial accidents cause significant loss and can overwhelm coping abilities, human-

²⁶ Julian of Norwich and Barry Windeatt, *Revelations of Divine Love* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.

²⁷ Dunning, *Reflecting the Divine Image*, 47.

caused violence adds an extra layer by forcing us to confront the distressing and costly reality of human frailty, as many people of faith understand it.²⁸

When family members and church leaders fail to reflect the love inherent in God's image, it causes harm and deprives others of their purpose. As a result, those harmed tend to deviate from their intended nature, causing more pain for themselves and those around them. This is the reality of human existence. Sin distorts everything, and as a result, one's purpose becomes unclear.

No one is immune to the destructive power of sin. Emotional trauma is something that everyone experiences to some degree. In rural churches, offering a safe and creative outlet for members to express unspoken emotional trauma is crucial to healing and living out their purpose. Human beings reflect their creation in the image of God by using their creative abilities for the greater good. According to Reverend Dr. Carolyn King, a United Methodist pastor and artist, "We are most like God when we create."

The rural church should recognize that people, as image-bearers of the Great Artist, have the creative potential to reflect God's image through creating. Language arts can be a great source of expressing and making sense of trauma. According to Fiona Sampson's book, *Creative Writing in Health and Social Care*: "Poetry and literature enrich our lives. Like all art, they are an attempt to bring order to chaos, to find meaning in everyday life and, with the right words in the right order, to capture what it's like to be alive."²⁹ Art can have spiritual benefits, too. It can help to unlock hidden fears, break

²⁸ Laurie Kraus, David Holyan, and Bruce Wismer, *Recovering from Un-Natural Disasters: A Guidebook for Pastors and Congregations after Violence and Trauma* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing, 2017), 10.

²⁹ Fiona Sampson, *Creative Writing in Health and Social Care* (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004), 9.

strongholds, and bring emotional freedom by expressing one's innermost thoughts. As beings created by God, church members are instilled with a natural tendency towards creativity. Whether they know it or not, this inherent disposition drives people to express themselves freely and innovatively. By embracing the creative potential of others, the Church not only honors the divine spark within them but also contributes to the richness and beauty of the world around them.

Journaling has long been a tool to help people express emotions. When people write to comprehend their purpose and design or to understand God and how their faith intersects with the challenges of daily life, they allow themselves to delve deeper beyond the surface-level language and stereotypes of everyday routines. Writing allows one to express and identify hopes and fears, providing a space to give them a name. In the creation story, God not only creates but give identity to that which is created. To name something was to claim authority and ownership over it. This is particularly true when it comes to naming Adam. The Hebrew word for man, *adam*, sounds precisely like the Hebrew word for ground or soil, *Adamah*.³⁰ It is almost as if when God named Adam, God reached deep into the soil of existence to create his name. Through the creative act of journaling, one is given permission to search deep within the soul and claim authority and ownership over one's emotions and purpose.

When one enters the sacred writing space, one can use words for the same purpose as an artist using paint, or a sculptor using clay. Rose Flint, author of *Fragile Space: Therapeutic Relationship and the Word*, describes the creative process of writing

³⁰ L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 30.

as: “The raw materials of poetry, words themselves – the sounds they make, the associations they carry, the images they can construct, their very ‘colours’ — can provide the same kind access to the imagination as a picture.”³¹ The text of Genesis describes the creation of humans by God, who used himself as the pattern. This text invokes a deeper meaning of imagination. Crafting words on a page to express personal thoughts requires care and creativity. Creative writing is an art that invites imagination. Writing about subjects such as grief can create an environment of healing for the writer and the listener if the words are spoken aloud.

Studies have shown that one does not necessarily have to engage in the act itself of creative writing to experience the therapeutic benefits that creative writing brings. Just as God created with the spoken word alone, listening to a poem being read can stimulate the senses and bring to the surface feelings to be explored. Poetry readings and other forms of spoken words can create meaningful spaces where people can experience transformative moments. In a women’s group, where poetry was read audibly, it was observed how a woman was so moved by characters in a poem who had taken on the roles of people whom she had known personally who had died within the year. As this woman listened to the poem being read aloud, she had not consciously thought about her grief and realized how grieved and lonely she had felt until then.³² In this situation, her actively listening and not writing uncovered feelings with which she had not dealt. In both writing and listening, creative expression can lead to personal transformation and purpose.

³¹ Sampson, *Creative Writing in Health and Social Care*, 142.

³² Sampson, *Creative Writing*, 142.

New Creation

The Genesis text discusses human identity and provides an answer to the question of "Who am I?". It also sheds light on human purpose by answering, "What do I do?". Furthermore, the creation story answers the question, "What am I meant to be?" The answer to this question is a new creation. To be a new creation speaks to the process of being transformed into the likeness of Christ. In her book *The Spirit and the Common Good: Shared Flourishing in the Image of God*, author Daniela Augustine writes about the concept of eschatology and the new creation. Augustine explains that Christ is the beginning of the new creation, which is reserved for the end times.³³ In the Genesis account of creation, humanity appears as the final piece of the puzzle, the last created thing. However, in the eschatological order of redemption, Christ, the new Adam, is the first fruit, the beginning of the new creation.³⁴ In other words, God is still creating and recreating all of creation.

The root cause of trauma seen in the world and people's lives is sin, as stated in the creation story. God took pleasure in creating the Universe. God loves creation. Sin corrupted what God created. In Genesis chapter three, one can read about the beginning of sin's deception and destruction. Eve was approached by Satan, who was in the form of a serpent. Eve believes a lie over the truth, and the *Imago Dei* becomes corrupted. Sin is why people need to be recreated. The perfect relationship between humans and God was disrupted by sin. When sin entered the world, it caused every person to be born into a dysfunctional relationship referred to as original sin. Every human spirit has this deep

³³ Daniela C. Augustine, *The Spirit and the Common Good: Shared Flourishing in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 33.

³⁴ Augustine, *The Spirit and the Common Good*, 33.

longing and desire to be restored and return to one's original image. God is in the business of restoring things to their original intention. God transforms all that is wrong in the world and brings about restoration through the person of Jesus Christ. According to Augustine, the coming of Christ is the fulfillment of the purpose of the universe.³⁵ Therefore, the biblical narrative represents a theological symmetry, showing a deep connection between the original creation and the new one. This symmetry highlights the resemblance between the two and binds them together.³⁶ Genesis points to humanity becoming a new creation through Jesus living in them.

Hans-Ruedi Weber highlights the words of the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, who reflect on the disobedience and sinfulness of Adam and Eve. Paul states that just as death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man (1 Corinthians 15:21). Paul goes on to say that just as all die in Adam, all will be made alive in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:22). In 1 Corinthians 15: 45–49, Paul concludes his thoughts by writing:

The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.

Paul believes that the true *Imago Dei* can no longer be recognized in generations after Adam and Eve but can be restored through Christ.³⁷ In rural societies where people are born into cycles of poverty, domestic violence, and mental health issues, these

³⁵ Augustine, 33.

³⁶ Augustine, 33.

³⁷ Weber, *Living in the Image of Christ*, 60.

problems can also be present within the church community. In this context, how can the church teach its members that it is possible to become a new creation, but the process is a journey?

This biblical passage from Genesis 1:26–28 reminds Christians that their goal is to be transformed into the perfect image of God, Jesus Christ. The author of the book of Hebrews declares the following statement about Jesus: “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” (Hebrews 1:3, NRSV). The fulfillment of Genesis is found in Jesus Christ. Becoming a new creation in Jesus brings a new beginning to every person. Dunning writes: “Christ embodies God’s creative destiny for humankind.”³⁸ Often, trauma leaves scars and labels on individuals. How might belief in becoming a new creation influence one’s perception of identity and purpose?

Hans-Ruedi Weber believed that the revelation of the image of God was evident in the crucified and risen Christ, and it required faith to see it.³⁹ On the other hand, Paul focused on a question that remains important today: How can the *Imago Dei* be restored in us?⁴⁰ In his writing to the Christian community in Rome, Paul answers this question with confidence, as noted by Weber: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he {knew beforehand} he also {determined in advance} to be conformed to the image of his

³⁸ Dunning, *Reflecting the Divine Image*, 42.

³⁹ Weber, 60.

⁴⁰ Weber, 60.

Son” (Romans 8:38–39).⁴¹ According to Weber, Paul abstains from specifying the details of the transformation process into Christ's image. However, he does assert that conformity to Christ is the ultimate objective of God's will, which thereby guarantees our transformation.⁴²

Theologian and author Sean McDonough emphasizes this promise in his book *Creation and New Creation: Understanding God's Creation Process*. He writes, “Rather than simply discussing how humans reconcile with God, Romans situates the restoration of humanity within its essential context: God’s intention to glorify himself through a renewed creative order.”⁴³ The promise of becoming a new creation, rather than just a better or good person, can bring hope to those seeking healing from trauma. When Adam and Eve sinned, God came to them with the promise of freedom from sin’s curse. God fulfilled this promise through Jesus, who became the pathway to eternal freedom as a new creation.

The process of becoming a new creation is directly connected to sanctification. This process is rooted and grounded in God’s grace. H. Ray Dunning explains:

In the Wesleyan perspective the imago was *totally* lost as a consequence of the Fall, but a reflection of it (in the pattern described earlier) is restored by the activity of prevenient grace. In fact, it is this graciously restored aspect of the image that constitutes personhood.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Weber, 60.

⁴² Weber, 60.

⁴³ Sean McDonough, *Creation and New Creation: Understanding God's Creation Process* (Bletchley, MK: Authentic Media Limited, 2016), 18.

⁴⁴ Dunning, *Reflecting the Divine Image*, 51.

Dunning explains how grace is an undeserved gift that transforms individuals into the image of God.⁴⁵ God originally created humans in His image with the desire to maintain that likeness. Humans disobey and have a desire to harm one another. God sent Jesus to restore humanity to their original design through rebirth. This is an act of God's grace. Dunning explains that grace has two aspects: freeing humanity from sin and renewing it in the divine image. The renewal process of grace is the journey of sanctification.⁴⁶ Church members can support trauma survivors on their journey to healing through grace.

Through spiritual writing exercises, a person can experience amazing grace in writing. Reflecting on how Jesus transforms one's heart and mind can provide a new perspective on past and present trauma. Trauma can have a lasting impact on a person's life, creating strongholds or mindsets that can be difficult to overcome.

Unfortunately, many trauma victims may believe that a better life is not possible. Healing is a journey, and it takes time. Based on Paul's writing, the church can encourage members to journal about their understanding of what it means to be a new creation. He said that anyone in Christ is a new creation, and the old has gone. (1 Corinthians 5:15). This reflective writing practice can help those who struggle to believe they are a new creation find healing and clarity through writing. In the book *Writing as Therapeutic Practice* by Maureen Freely, she powerfully describes how creative writing can bring healing: "The pen is mighty: it can heal and redeem and transform."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Dunning, *Reflecting the Divine Image*, 14.

⁴⁶ Dunning, *Reflecting the Divine Image*, 53.

⁴⁷ Sampson, *Creative Writing*, 142

Summary

The creation story in the book of Genesis offers a vivid and meaningful reminder to those struggling to understand their unique identity. Seeking divine guidance from the Creator is necessary for understanding one's identity. This realization can significantly shift a mindset for a church member with unhealed trauma as they begin to view themselves, others, and their relationship with God. Every person has immeasurable worth as they are made in God's image.

Trauma can cause a disconnection from one's identity, leading to a lifelong search for it. Ministry leaders can help individuals fulfill their quest for identity by using biblical teachings during recovery sessions, emphasizing that every person is created in the image of God. In rural communities, poverty and a lack of resources can make it difficult for individuals to find their sense of self. The rural church needs to take steps to tackle the issue of this identity crisis. The church can empower the laity to embrace their inherent worth and speak their truth by harnessing the divine light within each member.

Secondly, the selected biblical passage conveys a powerful message about discovering and fulfilling one's purpose. This theme is woven throughout the text, highlighting the significance of each individual as an image-bearer and their role in contributing to the body of Christ. However, the unspoken pain and struggles within the church members can sometimes hinder people's ability to fully comprehend their unique purpose and how they fit into God's plan. It is crucial to acknowledge that the Omnipotent Being, responsible for our creation, has also created each person with the capability to express one's creativity and contribute to God's continual act of creation.

The story of Adam and Eve serves as an example of how individuals can contribute to the creation process by working together, being fruitful, and caring for the earth. Similarly, every member of Christ's body has a specific purpose to bear fruit and contribute to the greater good. In a rural church setting, utilizing one's creative talents can be a powerful tool for communicating emotional and spiritual struggles, leading to valuable personal growth and well-being. Overall, the passage emphasizes the importance of discovering and fulfilling one's purpose while utilizing one's unique talents and creativity to contribute to God's plan for the world.

The text in Genesis sheds light on human identity and human purpose. Moreover, the creation story responds to the question, "What am I meant to be?" with a resounding answer—a new creation. Being a new creation indicates a transformation process into Christ's likeness. In simpler terms, God's work of creating and recreating extends to all of creation. Genesis defines human identity and purpose, indicating a process of transformation into the likeness of Christ. The hidden image and poetry of God is revealed in ordinary people as the church becomes more like Christ.⁴⁸ Building on the themes of healing and transformation, the next chapter will explore how the formation of identity in childhood and adolescence is shaped by both the unaddressed pain of grief and the powerful benefits of collaborative support, highlighting the importance of connection and shared healing in these formative years.

Garden of Eden

The summer before the garden died,
we stood barefoot under the apple tree.

⁴⁸ Weber, *Living in the Image of Christ*, 63.

I turned to you,
with the apple created
from pollen that wasn't removed
from wind or wild animals,
instead, by your own hands.

We stood at the base of each root,
as you bent low to the earth,
to remove the bruised
or what needed to be pruned.
With our hands, we broke the dirt,
in order to cross over,
to recreate.

The summer before the garden died,
we stood barefoot under the apple tree.
I turned to you,
to taste the apple,
offering the rest of me to you.

We stood hungry and unknowing,
made to create, to multiply,
as if to cross-pollinate,
to transfer,
to push the seeds that grow into new plants,
to produce the good fruit.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Unpublished work written by the author of this research.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

One of the most beloved Christian hymns in America is *Amazing Grace*. John Newton is credited for writing this famous hymn; however, many people are unaware of his friendship with a man who helped shape the words of *Amazing Grace*. This man is William Cowper, a famous eighteenth-century Christian poet and hymn writer.

Throughout the years, John Newton and William Cowper's relationship gave the world many inspirational hymns and poetry. William Cowper used creative writing to articulate his life experiences, draw closer to God, and share the gospel. As a result, the creative writing process provided William Cowper with a sense of purpose and peace in many transformative ways.

Throughout William Cowper's life, he suffered from family trauma and severe anxiety. The traumatic external pressures that one experiences during one's youth can have a long-lasting emotional impact. Research indicates this is forming in children as young as eight, nine, and ten.¹ Anxiety is something that everybody struggles with on some level. Studies reveal that severe anxiety is skyrocketing amongst young people between the ages of ten and fifteen years old, especially in girls. In adults, the significant

¹ "Facts of Families: Children and Grief," *American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, no. 8, (July 2013), https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Grief-008.aspx.

causes of anxiety are family and relationship problems, work stress, major emotional shock following a traumatic event, and the death of a loved one.² No one is immune, and the world is an anxious place.

In rural areas, many people do not seek help with emotional brokenness. Resources and therapy are not readily available. This is one of the reasons why Appalachia has some of America's highest drug overdose and suicide rates. There is a direct link between childhood trauma and social anxiety disorders developing as an adult. According to the American Psychiatric Association, social anxiety is the third most common psychological disorder in the United States.³ Many of our church pews in rural America are filled with anxious souls who feel trapped by their emotions and do not know how to express them. Urban areas provide more opportunities for creative expression that tap into the human creative spirit. How can the rural church support members who struggle to express their feelings? Like William Cowper, members of the church may find solace in creative writing to improve their health and emotional stability.

This chapter will highlight three major themes from the life of William Cowper for the historical foundation of my research project. The first theme is the importance of formation in childhood and adolescence, as evidenced in Cowper's early life. William Cowper suffered a painful childhood, and as a result, he battled anxiety and emotional trauma later in life. Experiencing traumatic events repeatedly during childhood can have

² "Facts of Families: Children and Grief."

³ Franklin Mesa, Melissa M. Nieves, and Deborah C. Beidel, "Clinical Presentation of Social Anxiety Disorder in Adolescents and Young Adults," in *Social Anxiety in Adolescents and Young Adults: Translating Developmental Science into Practice*, ed. Candice A. Alfano and Deborah C. Beidel (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011), 11–27.

significant and long-lasting effects on an individual's mental and emotional well-being.⁴

When a person experiences family trauma and lacks an outlet to express their feelings, emotions can become an overwhelming force, dragging them further into silence and isolation. Cowper experienced a cycle of instability in his childhood and adolescence formation, which led to feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness as an adult. And yet, even in Cowper's darkest days, creative writing became an outlet to process and articulate his feelings. Engaging in language arts allowed him to discover purpose and meaning in his suffering.

The second theme to be explored from Cowper's life is the importance of collaborative writing. Healthy relationships foster positive mindsets and encourage individuals to live out their spiritual callings. William Cowper and John Newton had a strong friendship that encouraged each other to use their gifts and inspired others through their creative writings. Their relationship provided a secure environment for them to write together and express their deepest thoughts and struggles through words, poetry, and song. This is important regarding the creative writing process. Collaborative writing can be highly beneficial for all parties involved. William Cowper and John Newton had a mutually influential relationship reflected in their writing collaborations. They motivated and held each other accountable for their work. Many of the hymns and poems they wrote are celebrated to this day. William Cowper also developed a close relationship with the Unwin family, devout Christians who encouraged him to write for the benefit of others. Cowper's partnership with God was the driving force behind his calling and creativity.

⁴ Richard G. Dudley, Jr., *Childhood Trauma and Its Effects: Implications for Police*, New Perspectives in Policing Bulletin (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2015).

The third theme examined from the life of William Cowper is his creative writing. Cowper's poetry is characterized by its sincere reflections on his struggles with his faith. The hymns he wrote are personal as well as relatable. He wrote poetry to express his profound emotions and beliefs. Cowper used his poetry and hymns to share the gospel, strengthen his faith, and inspire the church. William Cowper's poetry remains an inspiration today for its spiritual insight, honest thoughts, and beautiful language.

The Importance of Formation in Childhood and Adolescence

William Cowper was born on November 26, 1731, in the countryside of Hertfordshire, England.⁵ William Cowper's family was well-known and respected within the community. The Cowper family included members connected to the Parliament, as one family member was a Speaker of the House of Commons.⁶ William Cowper's father, Dr. John Cowper, was an Anglican clergyman who served a parish in Great Berkhamsted.⁷ Despite William Cowper's father being a man known for sharing the good news, William Cowper was primarily influenced by his mother, Anne Cowper. Anne Cowper was a descendant of John Donne, the English poet and dean of St. Paul's Cathedral.⁸ Anne Cowper loved being a mother. She was a nurturing and compassionate mother. Anne Cowper had suffered several miscarriages, and William Cowper and his brother, John Jr., were her only surviving children. Anne Cowper carried the weight of

⁵ Thomas Wright, *The Life of William Cowper* (Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 2005), 29.

⁶ David Cecil, *The Stricken Deer: The Life of Cowper* (London: Constable, 1988), 17.

⁷ Cecil, *The Stricken Deer*, 17.

⁸ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 30.

this loss with her, and it is possible the children sensed this heaviness in their home.

During his childhood, William Cowper witnessed his mother's silent grief over the loss of his siblings.

Dr. John Cowper appeared to be closer to his son, John Jr., while Anne Cowper developed a close bond with her son, William Cowper, to compensate for her husband's absence.⁹ Cowper deeply adored and looked to his mother to fulfill his every need, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. William Cowper's mother sheltered him from potential harm due to overprotection. Every night, William Cowper's mother would tuck him in and be the first to greet him in the morning.¹⁰ Cowper's mother encouraged him as a child to read, memorize, and be faithful in spiritual matters.

When William Cowper was six years old, he experienced a traumatic event that greatly impacted his identity. William Cowper's mother died.¹¹ After her death, William Cowper's mind, body, and soul were utterly shattered. During the 18th century, there was no established practice of providing grief counseling, especially for children. The formal study of trauma has a history of approximately 150 years, but theoretical models were developed mainly during the past two decades of the 19th century.¹² Research during those years focused primarily on the connection between life-threatening or violent events and their impact on individuals and community. William Cowper had been left on his own to process his grief.

⁹ Cecil, *The Stricken Deer*, 18.

¹⁰ Cecil, *The Stricken Deer*, 19.

¹¹ Cecil, *The Stricken Deer*, 19.

¹² A. Groenewald, "'Trauma is Suffering that Remains.' The Contribution of Trauma Studies to Prophetic Studies," *Acta Theologica*, 2018, suppl 26 (January 2018): 88-102.

For William Cowper, the one person from whom he received unconditional love was stolen from him. The questions and confusion that formed in Cowper's young mind created a sense that the world he lived in was a world that was unsafe. This traumatic event carried out with William Cowper for his entire life. Later in life, when Cowper was forty-seven years old, he wrote this about his mother: "I can truly say that not a week passes, perhaps I might with equal veracity say a day, in which I do not think of her."¹³ At the age of six years old, with no avenue available to articulate his emotions, William Cowper suffered tremendous grief that shook the foundation of his formative years. Later in life, William Cowper would write about his grief in a poem titled, "On The Receipt Of My Mother's Picture Out Of Norfolk. 1790":

My mother! When I learn'd that thou wast dead,
Say, wast thou conscious of the tears I shed?
Hover would thy spirit o'er thy sorrowing son,
Wretch even then, life's journey just begun?
Perhaps thou gavest me, though unfelt, a kiss;
Perhaps a tear, if souls can weep in bliss –
Ah, that maternal smile! – it answers – Yes.
I heard the bell toll'd on thy burial day,
I saw the hearse that bore thee slow away,
And, turning from my nursery window, drew
A long, long sigh, and wept a last adieu ...¹⁴

The grief William Cowper experienced would only be amplified when his father decided to immediately send him to a boarding school to begin his formal education.¹⁵ The idea of leaving all that he knew behind, the comforts of home where the scent of his mother still lingered, was frightening for William Cowper. In contemporary society, there

¹³ Cecil, *The Stricken Deer*, 19.

¹⁴ Noel Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound* (Greenville, SC: Emerald House Group, 1997), 49.

¹⁵ Cecil, *The Stricken Deer*, 20.

is a better understanding of how traumatizing events can affect the growth and development of preadolescent children. This is especially true when such children lack a nurturing and protective parental figure to provide support and alleviate the impact of the trauma.¹⁶ Although the boarding school was close to home, Cowper was tormented and afraid while attending. The leading cause of this fear was due to the relentless bullying of a fifteen-year-old teenager. William Cowper was a small and timid six-year-old boy, who was no match for a fifteen-year-old bully.¹⁷ Once again, William Cowper felt like he had nowhere to turn for help. Fear had gripped his entire small body and grieving heart.

William Cowper struggled with fear throughout his life, and it became a stronghold in many aspects of his life. William Cowper wrote about the abuse he suffered as a youth and how it impacted him throughout his life: “I well remember being afraid to lift my eyes upon him higher than his knees, and I knew him by his shoe buckles better than any other part of his dress.”¹⁸ The trauma William Cowper suffered as a child deeply affected him on every level – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. William Cowper’s identity began to become distorted, and the lack of stability and security would negatively affect William Cowper in the years to come.

When William Cowper was ten years old, he was transferred to Westminster School to further his education.¹⁹ Despite the change of surroundings, William Cowper was still pursued by tormenters. Perhaps William Cowper’s sensitive spirit and insecurity

¹⁶ Richard Dudley, *Review of Childhood Trauma*.

¹⁷ Cecil, *The Stricken Deer*, 20.

¹⁸ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 49.

¹⁹ Cecil, *The Stricken Deer* 23.

made him the target of such abuse. Despite the suffering William Cowper endured, he excelled academically, especially in languages, literature, and the sport of cricket.²⁰ It was at Westminster where William Cowper was praised by his teachers and noted as an exceptional scholar. During this time, Cowper began to seek the spiritual side of life slightly, but surprisingly, religious studies were not at the forefront at Westminster. William Cowper's soul became thirsty, and there was no real community to seek, nor did he develop deep spiritual relationships to quench this thirst. Nonetheless, William Cowper traveled on a journey of discovery. He remained insecure about his identity and the path he should take professionally.

At eighteen, William Cowper left Westminster and joined the law firm of attorney Mr. Chapman.²¹ It was evident to William Cowper that studying law was not a passion but a family connection. However, William Cowper had a strong desire to please his father; therefore, he pursued his degree in law.²² Cowper described his time in the law firm as: "Three years misspent in an Attorney's Office."²³ Cowper had no sense of calling in his life, but he knew law was not a path he wanted to pursue. He spent hours of his apprenticeship daydreaming. And soon, this daydreaming led him to write. Instead of developing his law skills, Cowper began to develop his skills as a poet.²⁴

The first few lines of poetry by William Cowper were love poems. Cowper's early writings were directed toward a young woman named Theadora, with whom he had

²⁰ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 40.

²¹ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 50.

²² Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 52.

²³ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 51.

²⁴ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 47.

fallen in love.²⁵ William Cowper and Theadora were both affectionally fond of one another. The only problem with this relationship was that Theadora was Cowper's cousin. Still, William Cowper succumbed to his desire and wrote more than a dozen poems to or about his cousin, Theadora.²⁶ Thankfully, when William Cowper's uncle discovered this love relationship brewing between Cowper and his daughter, he ended the relationship. Strangely, not because they were cousins, but because the uncle knew that Cowper suffered from depression. William Cowper was deeply disappointed by his uncle's actions. Once more, Cowper's emotional state was further damaged.

In 1757, William Cowper suffered from the end of a love relationship, the loss of his father, and the tragic death of a close friend. This grief struck William Cowper all in the same year.²⁷ This grief left him battling with feelings of loneliness and isolation.

William articulated his emotions in a poem titled "Disappointment":

Doomed as I am, in solitude to waste
The present moments, and regret the past;
Deprived of every joy I valued most,
My friend torn from me, and my mistress lost ...
Still, still I mourn, with each returning day,
Him snatched by fate in early youth away;
And her – through tedious years of doubt and pain,
Fixed in her choice, and faithful – but in vain.²⁸

William Cowper turned to pen and paper to express the intense emotions in his heart. Through his poetry, he articulated the disappointment he felt from an ill-fated

²⁵ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 54.

²⁶ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 51.

²⁷ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 51

²⁸ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 52.

relationship with his cousin and the grief that overwhelmed him due to the loss of his father and friend.

Although Cowper may not have fully realized the significance of his poetic expressions, he was effectively using creative writing as a means to process his grief. By freely expressing his pain, disappointment, and loneliness, Cowper was able to cope with his loss in a constructive way. This is evident from the themes in many of Cowper's poems written during this period.

Writing can help people process personal tragedy and conflict. In her book *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self Through Writing*, Judith Harris discusses the therapeutic use of writing. She explains how writers use their “voice” to confess and confront feelings of shame, guilt, loss, grief, or anger.²⁹ By using narrative reflective strategies, writers aim to better understand human suffering. Harris explains that writing can serve as more than just a refuge or defense, it can also be an armor for battle.³⁰

William Cowper harbored a deep sense of dread towards his work at the law firm, certain that his true calling was not that of a lawyer. His position in the firm caused him immense anxiety and depression. During this time, Cowper experienced a feeling of emptiness in his life, unable to quench the thirst that left his soul dry. Cowper carried a deep emotional wound that had never healed. Today, Cowper's symptoms would have been connected to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In her book *Sacred Wounds: A Path to Healing from Spiritual Trauma*, Teresa Pasquale writes:

²⁹ Judith Harris, *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self Through Writing* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 19.

³⁰ Harris, *Signifying Pain*, 19.

For any trauma survivor, there is a potential for the traumatic experience to get “stuck” in which case it moves from a lived experience into a condition known as PTSD. General study data shows that about 20 percent of people who experience trauma will experience PTSD.³¹

William Cowper was internally trapped, and his poetry helped him express his emotional journey of self-discovery.³² However, creative writing did not completely fill the void he felt within.

To make matters worse, he was qualified to take the bar, which included a cross-examination in the House of Lords. Cowper was not interested in becoming a lawyer and was unprepared for public speaking. Still, the examination date was set, and he would be forced to appear before the board. As this date got closer, William Cowper became more emotionally undone. He had no one with whom he could have an honest conversation. To escape this fate, William Cowper attempted suicide. William Cowper attempted to take his life more than once.

In the first suicide attempt, William Cowper purchased laudanum to poison himself. Before drinking the concoction, he changed his mind and drove to the river Thames. Cowper decided he would drown himself instead. But William Cowper found drowning was impossible, for there was not enough water. The river was dried up; all that was left was mud.³³ Later in life, as Cowper looked back on these failed attempts to take his life, he would come to understand how God wanted to gain control of his life.

³¹ Teresa B. Pasquale, *Sacred Wounds: A Path to Healing from Spiritual Trauma* (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2015), 22-23.

³² Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 52.

³³ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 54.

With the date of the cross-examination drawing near, William Cowper attempted once more to take his life. He was going to drink the laudanum and poison himself. However, when it was time, he could not seem to bring himself to swallow. Later, he would reveal that “some unseen power was holding him back.”³⁴ On the morning of his cross-examination in the House of Lords, he decided he should hang himself. And he did until the rope broke. A housemaid heard the fall and found William Cowper struggling on the floor, and she quickly called for help. The fall to the floor caused much bruising to Cowper’s face.³⁵ Cowper appeared to others to be a madman. As a result, those closest to William Cowper decided he was not fit to be cross-examined or even become a member of the Parliament House. Shortly after, William Cowper’s brother, John Cowper, decided to send William Cowper to Dr. Cotton’s asylum to receive professional help.³⁶

William Cowper’s mind was in a terrible state of self-loathing and destruction. A stronghold was erected in Cowper’s mind. He was convinced that he was the worst of all sinners and doomed to hell. He believed God was disappointed in him and waiting to bring wrath upon his soul. William Cowper’s feelings of condemnation are expressed in his poem titled “Damned Below Judas”:

Damned below Judas; more abhorred than he was,
Who for a few pence sold his holy Master!
Twice-betrayed Jesus me, the last delinquent,
Deems the profanest.
Him the vindictive rod of angry Justice
Sent quick and howling to the centre headlong;
I fed, with judgement, in a fleshly tomb, am

³⁴ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 104.

³⁵ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 55.

³⁶ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 114.

Buried above ground.³⁷

William Cowper felt God had no mercy and grace available for him. He believed that at any moment, God would strike him dead. Cowper's writings express this fixed mindset, in which he wrote: "I am damned."³⁸ William Cowper felt God was distant and angry. As he processed his loss and grief and struggled with his faith, he was convinced that God was unhappy with him and maybe even regretted creating him.

Diane Langberg, a psychologist with over 40 years of experience in trauma and abuse, explains that after experiencing trauma, our minds often default to reasoning from creation to the character of God rather than from the character of God to creation.³⁹ God loves that which was created in his image.

William Cowper suffered from an identity crisis. This caused Cowper's anxiety to worsen until he felt like he was sinking physically, emotionally, and spiritually. He desperately wanted to be healed and find peace. William Cowper would soon discover that peace with God begins with a relationship with Jesus.

Collaborative Writing

Despite having Christian roots, William Cowper's relationship with God was based on fear and condemnation, especially leading up to his suicide attempts. Those thoughts only intensified afterward. William became convinced that a God of wrath and vengeance watched his every move, waiting to strike him dead with judgment. Unhealed

³⁷ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 109.

³⁸ Cecil, *The Stricken Deer*, 71.

³⁹ Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 41.

trauma can cause even Christians to carry these same beliefs towards God. The way unhealed trauma can cause a person to view God stands in the way of developing a relationship with his or her Creator. The loss William experienced at an early age contributed to those feelings of doom and fear. Cowper despised himself. How Cowper viewed himself reinforced those feelings about how he viewed God's character. William Cowper stood confident he was a sinner, deserving the wrath of God. Conversely, he was unable to conceive of the love of God. Indeed, William Cowper was accurate about seeing himself rightly as a sinner. However, he was mistaken about seeing himself removed from the outstretched arms of God's love and grace.

In December of 1763, William Cowper and his brother John Cowper traveled to the asylum in St. Albans, England, to be committed and begin his treatment.⁴⁰ It was there that he became a patient of Dr. Nathaniel Cotton. Dr Cotton was a remarkable doctor; even more noteworthy, Dr. Cotton was a poet and a faithful Christian. Dr. Cotton believed in a holistic approach to healing.⁴¹ The doctor was eager to develop a relationship with William Cowper. For the next several months, Dr. Cotton and William Cowper spent many hours conversing and building their relationship.

In the first several months of his treatment, William Cowper often sat and listened to the doctor share stories, and occasionally, William would share something of himself. Feelings of coming judgment upon his soul due to his sinful nature continued to plague him. William Cowper wrestled with the truth of Christ and who he was in Christ. He did not see himself as a child created in the image of God. Cowper suffered from an identity

⁴⁰ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 62.

⁴¹ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 62.

issue. He was not convinced that God would extend grace to a man like himself. And yet, William Cowper's struggle with doubts about his faith were a means of seeking which would soon make him feel his soul awakened.

The story of William Cowper's conversion happened in a way only God could orchestrate. Cowper walked alone in the garden and found a Bible on a bench. The Bible was open to John's gospel, the 11th chapter, which speaks of Lazarus rising from the dead.⁴² When William Cowper read the story of Lazarus, his heart became stirred by the idea that Jesus extended mercy, goodness, and sympathy toward sinful humans. Cowper's eyes became filled with tears, pondering this truth.⁴³ Reflecting on that day, William Cowper would later write: "Little thinking, that it was the exact type of the mercy which Jesus was on the point of extending toward myself."⁴⁴ Feelings of peace washed over William Cowper. He began to contemplate whether Christ had died for him as well. William Cowper took a step towards recognizing that a relationship with his Creator was possible. Jesus was slowly breaking down the stronghold in William Cowper's mind.

Cowper began reading the Bible more. He read Romans 3:25, which speaks of God's grace in that God sacrificed Jesus on the cross to cleanse the world of sin.⁴⁵ William Cowper started to understand justification, that when one puts his or her faith in Jesus, that person is also cleansed and becomes a new creation. Upon reading that verse, William Cowper wrote: "Immediately I received strength to believe, and the full beams

⁴² Cecil, *The Stricken Deer*, 74.

⁴³ Cecil, *The Stricken Deer*, 74.

⁴⁴ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 116.

⁴⁵ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 63.

of the Sun of Righteousness shone upon me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement He had made, my pardon sealed in His blood and all the fullness and completeness of His justification. In a moment, I believed and received the gospel.”⁴⁶ On that day, William Cowper fully accepted who he was in Christ, a child created in the image of God. This life-changing truth was the ultimate salve for William Cowper. After accepting the truth, William fully embraced a relationship with Jesus and allowed the Holy Spirit to restore him. In a poem titled “A Song of Mercy and Judgment” Cowper describes his spiritual new birth in this he writes:

Lord, I love the habitation
Where the Saviour’s honour dwells;

At the sound of Thy salvation
With delight my bosom swells.
Grace divine, how sweet the sound,
Sweet the grace that I have found!

Me, through waves of deep affliction,
Dearest Saviour, Thou hast brought,
Fiery deeps of sharp conviction
Hard to bear and passing thought.
Sweet the sound of grace divine,
Sweet the grace which makes me Thine.

All at once my chains were broken,
From my feet my fetters fell,
And that word, in pity spoken,
Snatched me from the gates of hell.
Grace divine, how sweet the sound,
Sweet the grace that I have found!⁴⁷

The poem represents how a restored relationship with the Creator is the first step in healing. Every human being stands before God, created in his image, yet, at the same

⁴⁶ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 117.

⁴⁷ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 117-118.

time, a sinner in need of salvation. Every individual has an infinite worth before God and others and at the same time, a desperate need for Jesus Christ as Savior. This newfound relationship with God profoundly impacted William Cowper throughout his life. After his spiritual birth, he became deeply committed to praying and studying the Bible. In June of 1765, William Cowper left the asylum in St. Albans.⁴⁸

Another relationship that was beneficial to William Cowper's well-being and his creativity was John Newton. John Newton is famous for his stint as a swearing sea captain who openly opposed God. After his conversion, Newton became a devout man of God, eager to share the gospel with all. William Cowper first met John Newton in August of 1764, when Newton and his wife arrived in Olney to serve a church as a clergyman in the town where Cowper lived.⁴⁹ John Newton and William Cowper became instant friends and inseparable. Later in life, Newton reflected on his friendship with Cowper and wrote: "... never a day passed, but we spent at least twelve hours of it in each other's company when we were awake and at home."⁵⁰

John Newton and William Cowper were vastly different from each other in many ways. John Newton, a rough and confident man, was the opposite of the meeker and polished William Cowper. However, Newton and Cowper were similar in where it mattered the most, which was in their love for the Lord, commitment to growing in their faith, and passion for creative writing. William Cowper and John Newton frequently collaborated on drafting poems and reviewing each other's work. They published several

⁴⁸ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 69.

⁴⁹ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 158.

⁵⁰ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 86.

books of hymns together, such as *Olney Hymns*.⁵¹ The collaboration between Cowper and Newton helped them to develop their writing skills.

In the creative writing process, collaborating with a partner or a group can encourage individuals to share experiences, emotions, and thoughts while writing. Also, group journaling allows one to become accountable in processing past or present experiences. With over twenty-five years as a professor of School Psychology, Kenneth Merrell researched internalizing problems in children and adolescents and discovered effective interventions for depression. He found that journal writing can be a cognitive form of intervention for depression, particularly when used in combination with cognitive approaches to treatment.⁵² Keeping a personal journal provides a structured way to keep track of thoughts, activities, and feelings, and it also allows for personal reflections. Constructively shaping and using words to express raw emotions can be an effective therapeutic tool.

Collaborative writing to articulate trauma requires a vulnerable atmosphere. Individuals can articulate their true feelings through creative writing when genuine relationships are formed. This written work can be shared with others to inspire and offer new perspectives and promote healing. William Cowper and John Newton were writers known to have a close relationship that influenced their creative works. However, it is not to say that writers who work in solitude cannot articulate emotions and produce excellent work. The creativity of solo artists has undoubtedly blessed the world. Nevertheless, the partnership can foster constructive critiques, motivation, and accountability within the

⁵¹ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 128.

⁵² Kenneth W. Merrell, *Helping Students Overcome Depression and Anxiety* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2008), 137.

creative writing process within a safe group setting. In the article, *Writing as a Collaboration*, the authors share the incentives of belonging to a collaboration community of writers: “...the members of such a community within a community learn from one another, teach one another; they support and sustain one another.”⁵³ This collaboration beautifully portrays the friendship between William Cowper and John Newton.

When William Cowper would fall into spells of depression, his friend John Newton faithfully encourage him to continue writing and sharing his feelings through poetry and song. Newton would take Cowper out for walks in the countryside to remind him of God's beauty and provision.⁵⁴ John Newton encouraged William Cowper to live out God's calling to use his gifts to bless others.

After studying the impact of creative writing groups, Carl Vandermeulen states, “What writing groups offer is as depth of relationship, making possible real revision of writing and writers over time.”⁵⁵ Writing groups provide the space for individuals to share their work, and as they come to know each other and the writing each person does, they can learn to hear a new piece about what the writer wants to accomplish. Newton knew firsthand the positive influence of Cowper's creative writing on his life.

William Cowper enjoyed a close relationship with the Unwin family. Rev. Morley Unwin and his wife, Mary, treated Cowper like a member of their own family and

⁵³ James A. Reither and Douglas Vipond, “Writing as Collaboration,” *College English* 51, no. 8 (December 1989), 859.

⁵⁴ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 195.

⁵⁵ Carl Vandermeulen, *Negotiating the Personal in Creative Writing* (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2011), 75.

provided him with support and encouragement for his creative writing pursuits.⁵⁶

Whenever Cowper felt anxious, the Unwins would suggest that he use poetry as a form of therapy. In addition, the Unwins were devoted to God's work and often spent evenings reading and discussing the Bible and other religious texts with Cowper. The Unwin family was responsible for introducing William Cowper to John Newton by giving him a copy of Newton's book *Authentic Narrative*.⁵⁷ However, the most significant benefit of Cowper's relationship with Rev. Morely and Mary Unwin was their dedication to prayer. They prayed for Cowper and prayed with him.⁵⁸ Prayer makes a difference. It is essential for the body of Christ to come together in prayer every day. Dr. Sue Nilson Kibbey, an author and teacher on prayer, writes: "More important than daily nourishing his physical body with food was Jesus' continuous (moment-by-moment) supernatural nourishment through prayer."⁵⁹ Cowper believed in the nourishment of a disciplined prayer life. John Newton was quoted as saying the following about William Cowper: "Of all the men I have ever heard pray, no one equaled Mr. Cowper."⁶⁰ William Cowper was truly blessed to have people in his life who believed in the power of prayer.

⁵⁶ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 71.

⁵⁷ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 72.

⁵⁸ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 147.

⁵⁹ Sue Nilson Kibbey, *Open Road: The Adventure of a Breakthrough Prayer Initiative* (Knoxville, TN: Market Square Publishing, 2021), 12.

⁶⁰ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 111.

Creative Writings

William Cowper and John Newton utilized their writing abilities to deepen their spiritual growth and share the gospel's message. Their creative process allowed them to articulate their individual journeys of intimate connection with Jesus.⁶¹ Cowper viewed scripture as an inspiration to write hymns and poetry. Many of the bible's authors were poets themselves. The author of *Theopoetics: Spiritual Poetry for Contemplative Theology and Daily Living*, Phillip Michael Garner, referencing 1 Corinthians 13: 12–13, writes:

Through the use of poetry, Paul the apostle expressed belief in a time of human and divine encounter when the vulnerability of humanity before the Lord is matched with the vulnerability of God. God's vulnerability is an irreducible love, a love that enters the depths of creaturely difference to lift us up from the earth (ground) to become children of God.⁶²

Cowper and Newton, two hymn writers, expressed their experiences and spiritual journeys by penning down their thoughts in the form of hymns. They shared their writings with a community of Christians who met every week for study, prayer, and worship in a mansion known as the Great House.⁶³ These hymns served as a testimony of their experiences and provided insight into where they stood within their spiritual journeys.

The art of writing creatively can be a powerful tool in helping individuals connect with their spirituality and with God. Author and professor, Stephen Lewis emphasizes this truth in his book *The Bible and Poetry*. Lewis discusses how the poetic act connects

⁶¹ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 123.

⁶² Phillip Michael Garner, *Theopoetics: Spiritual Poetry for Contemplative Theology and Daily Living* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 4-5.

⁶³ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 175.

one's life to purpose through words. Lewis writes: "The poetic act draws close to the real, and in order to go to the depth of things, it recreates them for us by welcoming them in sounds, rhythms, and unlimited ramifications of meanings, and places these recreations in the domain of the possible."⁶⁴ Lewis adds: "In its own way, and without at all being supernatural, poetry too is revelation."⁶⁵ One discovers when one writes.

William Cowper's poetry is a prime example of this, as it is characterized by its simplicity, honesty, and Christian beliefs. Cowper expressed how God's presence can be seen in the natural world and how the love of Christ is all-encompassing, even for animals. The poet often wrote about his own struggles with faith, using themes of grace and mercy to document his spiritual journey. Through his poetry, Cowper contemplated the nature and character of God and captured Jesus' boundless love and mercy towards him. For example, in the hymn entitled, "My Soul Thirsteth for God," Cowper writes:

I thirst, but not as once I did,
The vain delights of earth to share;
Thy wounds, EMMANUEL, all forbid,
That I should seek my pleasures there.

It was the sight of thy dear cross,
First weaned my soul from earthly things;
And taught me to esteem as dross,
The mirth of fools and pomp of kings.

I want that grace that springs from thee,
That quickens all things where it flows;
And makes a wretched thorn, like me,
Bloom as the myrtle, or the rose.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Stephen E. Lewis, *The Bible and Poetry* (New York, NY: The New York Review Books, 2023), 13-14.

⁶⁵ Lewis, *The Bible and Poetry*, 14.

⁶⁶ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 125–126.

William Cowper based many of his poems and hymns on scripture, which is evident in his collection of hymns titled *Olney Hymns*.⁶⁷ Cowper and Newton collaborated on the writing of these hymns, and together, they wrote a total of 348 songs, with Newton writing 280 and Cowper writing 68 of them.⁶⁸ It was John Newton who published *Olney Hymns*, motivated by his friendship with Cowper and a desire to use the hymns as a tool to witness God's movement.⁶⁹

Cowper and Newton were both greatly influenced by scripture when writing their hymns. According to hymnologist Erik Routley's analysis of Cowper's hymns, he made extensive use of scripture: "the very attempt shows Cowper's great love for Scripture, his determination, which all Christians share, to find Christ, Light and Life, in every word of them."⁷⁰ Cowper's hymns reflect his deep concern for the church. He aimed to create hymns that were not only well-crafted but theologically accurate. Cowper's goal was to help believers encounter the God of the Bible through his hymns. Poet George Ella notes Cowper's use of scripture in his creative writings: "Cowper's idea of writing poetry at this time [1771–1772] was to put the Bible truths in verse form to make them easier to learn off by the heart and keep in memory."⁷¹ Cowper's goal was to help believers encounter the God of the Bible through his hymns.

⁶⁷ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 143.

⁶⁸ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 237.

⁶⁹ Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 197.

⁷⁰ Tom Schwanda, "The Spirit Breathes Upon the Word: The Formative Use of Scripture in the Hymns of William Cowper," *Journal of Spiritual Formation, Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 5, no. 1 (May 2012), 78–99.

⁷¹ Schwanda, "The Spirit Breathes Upon the Word," 87.

The process of memorization was proven to be effective due to Cowper's creative writing. During the mid-week prayer and worship services of Newton and Cowper, believers recited the hymns that the two friends wrote by memory. The church always looked forward to what the two would be inspired to write next. Among Cowper's most celebrated hymns is "Hark, my soul! It is the Lord!" The opening verse of this hymn reminds Christians of the hope that is secured in Christ:

Sometimes a light surprises
 The Christian while he sings;
 It is the Lord who rises
 With healing in His wings;
 When comforts are declining,
 He grants the soul again
 A season of clear shining,
 To cheer it after rain.⁷²

Throughout his life, William Cowper found comfort and stability in creative writing, which also included letter writing. When John Newton moved to London, he and Cowper wrote letters to stay connected and to explore deeper spiritual matters. Letter writing has always been a means to reflect on and express one's innermost thoughts. American poet Mary Ruefle provides one of the most beautiful answers to a question in a lecture titled 'Remarks on Letters':

For what is a letter, but to speak one's thoughts at a distance? Which is why poems and prayers are letters. The origins of poems, prayers, and letters all have this in common: urgency. They each originate in the pressing need to make a message directed at something unnear, that the absence of the unnear be made to appear present – that the presence of absence be palpably felt – that consciousness create consciousness."⁷³

⁷² Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 199.

⁷³ Jonathan Ellis, *Letter Writing Among Poets* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 2.

In many ways, letter writing is a form of creative writing. One writes to inspire the reader and evoke emotions through the written word. The Bible contains numerous letters that provide valuable spiritual insights and guidance for the church today. Without the epistles written by Paul to the Romans or Galatians, Christians would miss out on the teachings of Jesus and a deeper understanding of the church's significance. William Cowper recognized the importance of the art of letter writing, evident in his letters to John Newton.

Even during his darkest times, his poems served as a source of comfort and well-being for himself, as well as a means of encouragement for others. Today, William Cowper would be considered a confessional poet, alongside well-known confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell. William Cowper wrote some of his greatest poetry during his darkest hours.⁷⁴ When the abolitionist movement was gaining momentum, Cowper was urged by his friends the Unwins and John Newton to join them in their efforts. Cowper's poetry bore witness to his support for the cause of ending slavery. William Cowper's powerful poem, "The Negro's Complaint," has moved countless individuals and even inspired the great Martin Luther King Jr, who quoted from it.⁷⁵ Artists have a social responsibility to address injustices, and doing so is an act of love. Crystal Leigh Endsley, an artist and social activist, encourages marginalized youth to express themselves through spoken word poetry performances. Endsley explains how words have the ability to stir emotions and fuel thought.

Performing spoken word creates a space where alternative perspectives on societal structures can emerge. Like a smudged or cracked mirror, these

⁷⁴ Cecil, *The Stricken Deer*, 298.

⁷⁵ "William Cowper (1731–1800)," Cowper & Newton Museum, Learn, About, <https://cowperandnewtonmuseum.org.uk/william-cowper-1731-1800/>.

perspectives may not be clear, and simply seeing or hearing them is not enough. However, once these structures are identified, and their consequences are understood in relation to personal experiences, new strategies and plans of action can be developed to promote social change.⁷⁶

The poem that brought William Cowper fame was one of his longest works in free verse. Originally titled "The Sofa," Cowper later renamed it "The Task."⁷⁷ Between July 1783 and June 1785, William Cowper worked tirelessly on this poem. The poem "The Task" is divided into six books and covers a range of topics such as the beauty of nature, the Creator who made it, the need for the abolition of slavery, and the signs of the end of times. Cowper also wrote about his mental health and in 1799 he penned the poem "Castaway," considered one of his best works.⁷⁸

William Cowper died on November 20, 1800.⁷⁹ His literary works influenced many writers who followed him, including poets like William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, and Alfred Tennyson, as well as novelists like Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters.⁸⁰ William Cowper's creative writing has lasting value for readers. He employed the art of creative writing to bring himself and others closer to God. Cowper utilized poetry to articulate negative emotions and painful memories, finding that writing through his experiences improved his overall health and wellbeing.

⁷⁶ Crystal Leigh Endsley, *The Fifth Element: Social Justice Pedagogy Through Spoken Word Poetry* (Albany, NY: Suny Press, 2016), 20.

⁷⁷ Davidson, *How Sweet the Sound*, 243.

⁷⁸ "William Cowper," Cowper & Newton Museum.

⁷⁹ Cecil, *The Stricken Deer*, 299.

⁸⁰ "William Cowper," Cowper & Newton Museum.

Summary

The life of William Cowper is beneficial to this project as it sheds light on the significance of childhood and adolescence formation, and the impact of untreated trauma. After suffering the loss of his mother at an early age, William Cowper was neglected by his father and did not receive any treatment for his grief and emotional trauma. Research has detailed the signs that children exhibit when they are having severe problems with grief and loss, which include extended periods of depression, fear of being alone, withdrawal from friends, and repeated statements of wanting to join the dead.⁸¹ As a young child, William Cowper displayed all these traits in his behavior.

In rural America, young people are struggling with emotional health issues such as severe anxiety. Relationships and grief are the major factors causing anxiety in adults. William Cowper utilized creative writing to express his emotions, pain, grief, and struggles with faith in a way that was not self-destructive. In rural communities with limited family structure and stability, exposure to cultural arts can help individuals struggling with self-esteem and identity issues articulate their unaddressed trauma.

A second aspect to study from the life of William Cowper, which is foundational to the research project, is how he benefited from relationships that fostered creativity and collaborative writing. John Newton and William Cowper became friends instantly and thoroughly enjoyed one another's friendship. They lived in the same town, and many of the townspeople often observed Newton and Cowper on long walks together, discussing and critiquing their most recent written works. Together, they created some of the most

⁸¹ "Facts for Families: Grief and Children," *American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, June 2018, https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Grief-008.aspx.

celebrated Christian hymns, such as “Amazing Grace,” “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood,” “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds,” and “Hark, my Soul, It Is the Lord!.” William Newton and John Cowper’s relationship points forward to the importance of collaborative writing for health.

Authentic relationships create an environment of vulnerability. When people are transparent with one another, they can honestly share their feelings. Often, people feel more comfortable expressing what is deep within their souls through writing. In a creative writing setting within the church, when relationships develop, those created in the image of God can allow each other's creativity to flow freely. Cowper and Newton's creative work was a fitting example of how such collaboration can be beneficial.

Cowper and Newton were close friends who supported each other in following God's calling. William Cowper's life exemplifies the importance of prayer in maintaining relationships. He was committed to praying for his friends, and they were faithful in praying for him. Prayer has a profound impact, especially when those who pray believe it can make a difference. In William Cowper's life, prayer played a vital role in bringing about significant changes.

In the 18th century, mental health and recovery were not given much importance in society. Therefore, William Cowper did not seek any treatment for his health issues as the recovery centers were not developed at that time. The same can be said about rural America, where innovative therapies and resources for mental health are not readily available. William Cowper utilized creative writing as a means of expressing his past and current experiences of trauma. He used poetry and hymns to convey his painful memories and negative emotions, as well as his responses to life's circumstances as a Christian.

Cowper's poems and hymns became a tool for sharing his testimony, as well as the gospel. Creative writing has the potential to not only to enhance the writer's life but also positively impact the world. Although Cowper struggled with anxiety, creative writing did not cure his mental health issues, but it certainly contributed to his overall well-being.

Church-based creative writing workshops provide a safe and welcoming environment for individuals to express various emotions, including anxiety, loneliness, happiness, and insecurities without fear of judgment or pressure for immediate resolutions. Writing is a transformative and spiritual journey that nurtures creativity, allowing participants to connect with their inner selves and potentially discover their Creator.

Julia Cameron, a director of workshops on spiritual creativity and the author of *The Artist's Way*, shares her thoughts on the process of creative writing, “I have seen (writing) blocks dissolved and lives transformed by the simple process of engaging the Great Creator in discovering and recovering our creative power.”⁸² William Cowper utilized creative writing to pay homage, adore, and connect with God. Anxiety is a condition that impacts numerous individuals, including devout followers of Jesus Christ. Could incorporating creative writing into their routine help churchgoers articulate and cope with their innermost struggles and spiritual beliefs, ultimately leading to a healthier church community?

The world is stressful, but the church can be a space for members to articulate stress in a creative and calming atmosphere. By using creative writing techniques and fostering a deeper appreciation for the language arts, individuals can experience a new

⁸² Julia Cameron, *Artist's Way: 25th Anniversary Edition* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2016), 1.

sense of health and wholeness. This chapter highlighted an important historical example of creating a space within the church community for the voiceless to have a voice. As we move forward, the next chapter will delve into how interpreting scripture through a creative theological lens can deepen our understanding of God, highlighting the importance of creative community groups, such as writing, in helping church members navigate their ongoing struggles.

The Exodus

She made a path between the
water reeds,
the same route she took for years—
before the pregnancy,
before the tendency to walk along the road alone,
before the ache from the birth at night.

It was her daughter who was lowered
to the dark water,
placed in a basket,
to be raised by foreign hands,
by a God whose mouth became a midwife
to her life, a road that lined
the riverbank.

It was her daughter, lowered to the water,
left to set adrift,
and it was she, the mother,
who never looked back.⁸³

⁸³ Unpublished work written by the author of this research.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

As has already been shown, how people process trauma affects their perception of the Divine, oneself, and creation. Unprocessed trauma can hinder one's ability to engage with faith communities, which can lead to spiritual isolation among Christian community members. Traumatic experiences affect a person's mind, body, spirit, and voice. Unspoken trauma may lead a person to remain silent. Brokenness can stifle one's mission to partner with God in creation. Grief can hinder their growth in comprehending and processing the teachings of the Gospel which can bring about positive transformations in themselves and their community.

What if churches offered a safe space for children and adults to cope with the effects of grief and traumatic childhoods? A creative approach may be required to help people understand and process the Gospel differently. The message of Jesus is powerful and life-giving, and the church needs to communicate this message in all languages effectively. In order to do so, the church must tap into its imaginative side and explore the poetic potential of language. Church members can use poetry as a form of recovery to express themselves and avoid self-destruction and destroying what they create.

The Word of God is powerful, and nothing else is like it. The scriptures are filtered with poetry. A creative approach to interpreting scripture can help in teaching and understanding God's continuous grace for the laypeople. Offering creative community

groups, such as writing, is crucial for church members to address their ongoing struggles, especially for today's youth. This foundational chapter will delve into the theology of theopoetics. The word theopoetics originates from the Greek word *poiesis*, which is not limited to poetry but refers to the act of creation.¹ It explores the various creative ways people perceive and understand the concept of God.

A previous examination of William Cowper's life explored the advantages of creative writing. Cowper and Newton's collaboration contributed numerous inspiring hymns and poems to the world. Cowper utilized creative writing to strengthen his connection with God and spread the gospel message. Theopoetics is a theology centered around the act of creating. Theopoetics and creativity go hand in hand, and comprehending this theological approach can offer numerous benefits for the emotional and spiritual health and well-being of church members in rural areas.

The Bible describes a God who offers freedom and healing, as seen through the actions of Jesus in the New Testament. He traveled throughout Galilee, teaching and preaching about the Kingdom while also healing those who suffered from various illnesses and diseases (Mt. 4:23). Theology of theopoetics emphasizes the healing potential of allowing the voiceless to express themselves. This expression may be through a written song, a prayer, or a poem. In her book *Artisanal Theology*, Dr. Lisa Hess, professor of Practical Theology and Contextual Ministries at United Theological Seminary, writes: "Thankfully, there are many entrances into God's Story as there are the proverbial rooms within God's mansions. The draw of deeper spiritual practice represents

¹ Ellen G. Levine and Stephen K. Levine, *Art in Action: Expressive Arts Therapy and Social Change* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011), 24.

a discovered hallway. The potential resting places in such a pursuit of theological wisdom are innumerable.”² This expansive view of spiritual exploration invites one to embrace the diversity of paths that lead to a fuller understanding of God, urging the church to continually seek new ways to engage with divine wisdom. While this may be uncomfortable for some theologians, theopoetics can transform one's spirit and offer a liberating perspective on Christian doctrine and faith.

Spiritual transformation and theopoetics are intertwined as a process for religious reflection. When a community provides a spiritual environment where art and ideas can be explored and appreciated, it opens up space for individuals to become more like Jesus Christ as an artist with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul emphasized this process in his writings, stating that as we reflect the Lord's glory, we are being transformed into his image with increasing glory from the Spirit.³

Creative writing workshops can help adults and youth discover God through theology and poetry. Studies have shown that spiritual formation involving creative writing can improve well-being, particularly regarding self-identity and connection with others. Creative activities enhance a sense of personal identity by enabling people to become aware of their hidden abilities.⁴ Vulnerability is a crucial aspect of spiritual formation through creative writing.

² Lisa Hess, *Artisanal Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 68.

³ 2 Corinthians 3:18.

⁴ Victoria Stewart, Helena Roennfeldt, Maddy Slattery, and Amanda J. Wheeler. "Generating Mutual Recovery in Creative Spaces." *Mental Health and Social Inclusion* 23, no. 1 (2019): 16-22, <http://dtl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/generating-mutual-recovery-creative-spaces/docview/2178107248/se-2> <https://doi.org/10.1108/MHSI-08-2018-0029>.

As the Genesis account discusses, Adam is responsible for caring for creation. As the first image-bearer of God, Adam reflects God's creative character. This act of caring for creation and reflecting God's character continues today in the church. Thus, human life was first designed to reflect the glory of God. As a consequence of sin, God's design for humanity was distorted, leading to trauma in the world and people's lives.

In the New Testament, Jesus is depicted as the Second Adam who liberates humanity from the forces of sin and death. The restoration of the *Imago Dei* is solely accomplished by Jesus, which establishes a sense of purpose for both men and women. The purpose of the church is intertwined with both creation and recreation. God is the Creator and Author, who continues to shape and transform the church patiently and lovingly. In this process, church members can also create and recreate their own stories and the world around them. This is the very essence of theopoetic theology.

The idea of theopoetics provides an opportunity for the church to offer unique and effective pastoral care for those who have experienced traumatic life events. This approach to theopoetics promotes healing by allowing communities to reflect on theology poetically, fostering a deeper understanding of God and creation. The process of theopoetics may be unfamiliar to some, but it ultimately leads to the discovery that the soul requires renewal.

Theopoetics focuses on language, form, experience, and imagination, enabling people to reflect the *Imago Dei* and respond to Christ's love through language arts. Theopoetic theology is neither traditional nor neatly systematic in its approach. It is a theology that encourages individuals to express trauma through poetic expression, creating connection and confidence among church members. Providing opportunities for

expressing trauma creatively can be beneficial for a faith community. The absence of cultural arts within a community can hinder healing and recreation, perpetuating cycles of brokenness.

What is Theopoetics?

The concept of theopoetics has an interesting backstory. The term was coined in the 1960s and 1970s when religious leaders were concerned about the decline of Christianity. During this period, the hippie movement promoted a more open and tolerant approach, which contrasted with the strict rules and restrictions imposed by middle-class society. Many people were turning away from Christian beliefs and lifestyles. L. Callid Keefe-Perry, a professor of public theology and founder of Theopoetics.net, shares how on April 8, 1966, TIME magazine published an article titled "Is God Dead?" which propagated the idea of a passive, dying God.⁵ This further discouraged people from pursuing their faith.

Church leaders were alarmed by the dwindling interest in God and worried that Christians would become a minority. A discussion on the concept of theopoetics was initiated in response to the situation. The aim was to renew language and thought to appeal to people of all ages, particularly those who had lost interest in God and the church by moving from a theo-logic to a theo-poetic.⁶

In 1971, at the American Academy of Religion, Stanley Hopper mentioned theopoetics for the first time during his speech titled "The Literary Imagination and the

⁵ L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014) 23.

⁶ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 26.

Doing of Theology." He claimed that humanity was undergoing a "radical revisioning of our way of seeing and thinking."⁷ Theopoetics suggests an artistic way to seek and understand Christianity and the interpretation of the bible in a fresh way. Stanley Hopper played a significant role in establishing a connection between arts and religion in the United States and other countries. He served on the Society for the Arts, Religion, and Contemporary Culture, chaired the Commission on Literature at the National Council of Churches, and was the sole United States delegate at the First Conference on Religion and the Arts held at the Ecumenical Institute in Celigny, Switzerland.⁸

According to Hopper, theology can only remain relevant if Christians embrace the power of myth and imagination.⁹ Rather than relying on a prosaic, theological approach that reduces mysteries to knowledge, Christians should strive for a poetic perspective of the divine.¹⁰ Theopoetics offers a more creative and skillful way to capture the thoughts, experiences, and imaginations of God and the Kingdom of God. Glenn Hughes, in his book *A More Beautiful Question: The Spiritual in Poetry and Art*, writes about how a good work of art is like a cosmos, suggesting both the richness of meaning and the ordered unity of the cosmos that engenders and contextualizes our creaturely existences.¹¹

⁷ Stanley Hopper, "The Literary Imagination and the Doing of Theology," in R. Melvin Keiser and Tony Stoneburner, *The Way of Transfiguration: Religious Imagination as Theopoiesis* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 207, quoted in Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 26.

⁸ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 19.

⁹ Hooper, "The Literary Imagination and the Doing of Theology," 207, quoted in Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 26.

¹⁰ Hooper, "The Literary Imagination and the Doing of Theology," 208, quoted in Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 26.

¹¹ Glenn Hughes, *A More Beautiful Question: The Spiritual in Poetry and Art* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 26.

By embracing a more poetic and mysterious approach, youth and adults can better understand and appreciate their faith.

In a discussion about theopoetics, Keefe-Perry believed that for Hopper, many theologians write about God as if God is distant and separate, but the language used to describe God is not always clear-cut.¹² Theopoetics aims to create a new language for understanding God. During this discussion, Christianity started gaining momentum again as evangelical leaders took center stage in preaching the gospel, and the debate about theopoetics faded. However, the movement resurfaced in the late 1980s and 1990s due to scandals among American evangelicals, which prompted a renewed interest in the topic. The concept of theopoetics also emerged in the early 2000s as a school of thought that linked process philosophy and theology.¹³ It focused on aesthetics, genre, and form, driven by the need for change within church culture.

Amos Wilder and Rubem Alves were influential voices who also used theopoetic theology within their own creative works before the term theopoetics was even coined. Amos Wilder, born in 1895, shared a passion for the language arts with his brother Thornton Wilder, who wrote the award-winning play "Our Town."¹⁴ During World War I, Amos Wilder served in the military and wrote a collection of poetry, which was published in 1923.¹⁵ He later studied ministry at Yale and was ordained, receiving his doctorate from the same institution. After completing his studies, he took a teaching

¹² Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 28.

¹³ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 4.

¹⁴ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 33.

¹⁵ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 33.

position at Harvard. Amos Wilder was a key figure in defining the key elements of theopoetic theology, bringing together poetic artistry, biblical scholarship, literary critique, and pastoral insight.¹⁶

Wilder strongly believed that thought and imagination could coexist and complement each other. Keefer-Perry argued that Wilder advocated for a theological discourse that incorporated personal experience and creative imagination through the practice of theopoesis.¹⁷ Theopoesis, originating from ancient Greece, refers to the art of using words and thoughts to inspire spiritual growth on an aesthetic and existential level. Amos Wilder argued that creating space for new expression leads to new convictions and actions.¹⁸

Rubem Alves was born in Brazil in 1933. He received his bachelor's degree in theology from the Presbyterian Seminary in Brazil, followed by a master's degree in theology from Union Theological Seminary in New York and a doctorate in theology from Princeton.¹⁹ Alves was a theologian, psychoanalyst, and educator. Later in life, he authored several children's books. Much of Alves' work is recognized as being influenced by theopoetics, as he expressed his grievances about theology:

Theology is not a net that is woven in order to capture God in its meshes, for God is not a fish, but Wind that no one can hold ... Theology is a net which we weave for ourselves, so that we might stretch out our body in it.²⁰

¹⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *A Fragile Craft: The Work of Amos Niven Wilder* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 4.

¹⁷ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 35.

¹⁸ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 35.

¹⁹ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 40.

²⁰ Bruno Linhares, *Nevertheless I Am Continually with You: A Cosmopolitan and Theopoetic Reframing of Pastoral Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2008) 237, quoted in Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 43.

Rubem Alves departed from the typical academic ways of discourse in his later writings and was more heavily inspired by poetic genre and imagination. American professor and theologian, Thomas Altizer, once described Rubem Alves and his writings as being less concerned with proving a point and more focused on the craft of words. He likened Alves to a cook, preparing words that captured a facet of the movement of the spirit, crafting them in the stove heat of his own body lit with the fire of imagination, and serving them to his readers so that they might catch some taste of the experience of hope and God.²¹

Keefe-Perry adds in an interview on theopoetic how instead of focusing solely on the content of religious texts, theopoetics considers the style, genre, and medium in which they are presented. This attention to aesthetics allows for a deeper understanding of how the container in which something is presented can affect its meaning.²² Theopoetics expands the idea that there are numerous ways to comprehend God and our connection to the divine. Engaging in theopoetics for theological reflection is a transformative experience that helps people to tap into their authenticity.

In the book *Theopoetics Folds: Philosophizing Multifairousness*, Sam Laurent highlights Søren Kierkegaard's work as poesis. According to Laurent, Kierkegaard believed that creating is a turbulent process, often involving despair, fear and trembling,

²¹ Thomas Altizer, "Review of Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture." *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, 42 (1974), 376-78 quoted in in Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 46.

²² *Theopoetics -an Interview with Callid Keefe-Perry* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2023), 26:45, <https://youtu.be/nHuHn3vxePg?si=ZDdYx7ezVsrK0txi>.

and anxiety. Kierkegaard imagined that selfhood is an active process of becoming.²³

Theopoetics encourages individuals to not only ponder the supernatural but also to encounter it. While still acknowledging the importance of thought and reason, theopoetics allows one to expand beyond the tangible and delve into theology's spiritual and poetic aspects by bridging the gap between theology and experience.²⁴

Theopoetic also acts as a bridge between theology and individual experiences. For instance, a Christian may have a basic understanding of the term sanctification. Looking through the lens of theopoetics can help one explore the meaning of a concept more deeply and apply it innovatively. For some, this will lead to a better understanding of its significance after becoming a Christian, allowing for a deeper comprehension of its importance. For example, a poem titled "Sanctification," exemplifies how theopoetics enables Christians to articulate their experiences and understanding of this process creatively:

I listen more closely now.
All day I hear
the world around me.

And sometimes, in the silence,
when the air is crisp as the first drift
of snow—

I almost hear
the fruit in me
ripening.²⁵

²³ Roland Faber and Jeremy Fackenthal. *Theopoetics Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2013), 7.

²⁴Keefe-Perry, *Theopoetics*.

²⁵ Unpublished poem written by the author of this research project.

Keefe-Perry agrees with J. Denny Weaver, an author and Professor Emeritus of Religion at Bluffton University, in that he defines theopoetics as follows:

A non poet's definition of theopoetics might be that it is a hybrid of poetry and theology. But to call it that misses the mark. It is an entire way of thinking. From the side of poetry, it shows that ideas are more than abstractions. They have form— verbal, visual, sensual— and are thus experienced at least as much as they are thought ... What one learns from the theology side of theopoetics has at least much importance. One observes that theology is more than an abstraction. It is a way of thinking, visualizing, and sensing images of God. And at that juncture, theologians should become aware that traditional theology ... is a way to think about the divine, but is only one of multiple ways to consider God.²⁶

Theopoetics is still a relatively new concept in theology. It involves using creative expression and imagination to approach God. A theopoetic approach can aid in pastoral care, nurture creative spiritual formation, and deepen our understanding of God's mission for the church. By embracing theopoetics, the church can create a new way of experiencing and connecting with the divine, especially for those who have undergone traumatic events. A theopoetic approach to biblical theology can allow members to experience faith's mystery, wonder, and excitement more profoundly and meaningfully.

Theopoetics and Pastoral Care

The use of theopoetic theology in pastoral care can help create a culture within the church that values expression, listening, and creating as a way to care for members who are dealing with trauma. Theopoetics allows pastors to provide an environment where members can express their pain and hope in ways that deepen relationships within faith communities. When a lay member shares their deep hurt hindering their spiritual growth,

²⁶ J. Denny Weaver, "Series Editor's Foreword," in Jeffery Gene Gundry, *Songs from an Empty Cage: Poetry, Mystery, Anabaptism* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2013), 13–14, quoted in Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 2.

a pastor can invite them to process their pain creatively, allowing them to explore their faith in the midst of their suffering through the art of creative writing.

In his book on pastoral care, Howard Clinebell writes how pastoral care can "release our trapped creativity—the potential creativity that is present in every person. By renewing us as individuals, pastoral care helps empower us to become agents of renewal in the church and in a society that desperately needs renewal."²⁷ Theopoetics can enable the pastor to accompany the parishioner in a way that discovers and welcomes creative expression. Through the art of poetry, those who are hurting and hungry can once again experience and imagine how the church encourages them to voice their pain as a means of healing and growth.

Theopoetics is a tool that can be used in pastoral care to allow members to embody scripture so that Jesus can touch their lives through the language arts. The healing power of Jesus can be experienced when one is open to expressing one's wounds in a poetic language that is permitted to flow freely. Howard Clinebell adds to his study regarding pastoral care by writing: "One dimension of pastoral care is the utilization of a variety of healing methods to help people handle their problems and crises more growthfully and thus experience healing of their brokenness."²⁸ When a pastor creates a safe space for church members to express their struggles and pain in a non-judgmental way, through writing, they are empowered to speak into their trauma and gain new understanding and perspective on how Jesus cares for them. At times, the brokenness one

²⁷ Howard Clinebell and Bridget Clare McKeever, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 15.

²⁸ Clinebell and McKeever. *Basic Types of Pastoral Care*, 26.

experiences can only be conveyed through the written word. Jesus has the power to heal that brokenness.

A theopoetic approach to pastoral care awakens one's mind, body, and soul through the process of feeling, envisioning, and creating. Rebecca Doverspike, an interfaith chaplain and poet, uses poetry and spiritual care to support her hospital staff. Doverspike believes that, similar to the psalms, poetry captures human experiences and helps individuals feel less isolated during their most challenging times.²⁹ The written word has the power to provide comfort and meaning to those experiencing trauma.

God has given pastors an inner well of resources to help their members explore. Clinebell states that pastoral care's first dimension is "enriching our consciousness, releasing our creativity, deepening our insight, sharpening our awareness, expanding our intellectual and artistic horizons - all of these are part of a wholeness-centered approach to pastoral care."³⁰ The theology of theopoetics and pastoral care is understanding how one may discover a new voice, song, or even a poem within as one grows deeper in understanding who God is. The art form of poetry has been known to aid one in perceiving the divine voice; its language echoes the very act of Creation.

The church is a community where members grow in the knowledge of Christ and the mission of Christ. In a congregation, people discover avenues of service that connect with their spiritual gifts. However, when church members carry unspoken wounds, their brokenness keeps them from participating in their mission. In her essay "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony," Rebecca Chopp discusses how testimony can break the social,

²⁹ Rebecca Doverspike, "Utilizing Poetry as Spiritual Care for Hospital Staff," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 78, no. 1-2 (March 2024): 47-50.

³⁰Clinebell and McKeever. *Basic Types of Pastoral Care*, 32.

psychological, and epistemological silences surrounding trauma.³¹ Chopp argues that recognizing the role of language is crucial in understanding the effects of trauma. Chopp argues that poetics is essential to theology as it transforms and convicts the imagination, affirming the voices of those in trauma instead of marginalizing them.³² A poem can be a testimony. The effects of this can be demonstrated in a poetry reading where individuals share their poems and receive affirmation of their work.

A theopoetic approach to pastoral care requires the art of listening. When helping members talk about their scars, one must learn to listen to what is spoken through the written word. Questions can be asked to encourage reflection on scripture and how it relates to their understanding as a spark to ignite writing about past or present pain and hope. In her book *Holy Listening*, Margaret Guenther writes, "A good teacher asks questions, but they must be the right questions - ones that open doors, invite the directee to stretch and grow."³³

The Bible teaches how Jesus posed many questions to his students to encourage them to reflect, think, and develop their faith. Reflecting on theological questions through writing can help uncover and process emotional and spiritual trauma. Good questions can serve as a catalyst for writing, which can enhance one's understanding of Jesus' mission and the church's role. Ultimately, theopoetics involves asking questions and listening to

³¹ Rebecca S. Chopp, *Theology and the Poetics of Testimony* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

³² Chopp, *Theology and the Poetics of Testimony*, 9.

³³ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1992), 65.

what is communicated through the written word, making it an essential component of pastoral care today.

Theopoetics is a powerful tool for theological discourse, particularly in understanding the nature and character of God. L. Callid Keefe-Perry advocates for integrating poetry within theological discourse. This approach allows for ongoing interpretations of God, God's word, and God's actions without requiring a rigid and definitive proclamation of God's nature.³⁴ A theopoetic pathway helps people of faith who are emotionally and spiritually broken and perhaps disconnected from the church to reconnect with the *Imago Dei*.

In an article written by Keefe-Perry, he states that for the church and congregations to thrive, the church must find ways to nurture each other in such a manner that the inspiration and integrity of the Gospel are maintained and encouragement is given to all men and women to explore and express their relationship with God.³⁵ As a result, not every voice will sound the same. Theopoetics is grounded in the idea of understanding self and God authentically.

Theopoetics and Worship

Expressing trauma through poetry can help church members overcome past painful narratives and create new stories with the help of God's grace. This story may impact how church members participate in worship when healing leads to gratitude for God Almighty, the Great Healer. The Bible contains numerous examples of poetic

³⁴ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 135.

³⁵ L. Callid Keefe-Perry, "This is Where Power Lies," *Creative Transformation* 19, no. 1-2 (Winter/Spring 2010): 18-20.

writing. The Hebrew writers employed verse for various purposes including celebratory song, lament, oracle, oratory, prophecy, reflective and teaching argument, and liturgy.³⁶

A theopoetic approach enables one to express his or her faith in God as both creator and healer through the use of stories, poetry, and liturgical practices such as song, prayer, and dance. This approach allows Christians to genuinely witness and testify to the Divine as they celebrate Jesus' presence.

Worship allows the church to experience the transformative presence of God, renewing mind, body, and soul. James Olthuis, the author of *Dancing in the Wild Spaces of Love*, believes that God cannot be studied or understood through theories or as an object. Instead, he proposes that theopoetics relinquishes control and responds to God's gift by using words, narratives, poems, pictures, metaphors, deliberations, and imaginings to bring God's dynamic and compelling presence into human existence.³⁷ James Olthuis writes: "In speaking of God in poetic metaphors of faith, avowing deep truth without definitional delimitation, theopoetics is theology in the mode of doxology."³⁸ Through theopoetics, creatures in God's image can praise their Creator by creating and becoming woven into the fabric of worship. Worship connects people to God's ongoing creativity in both the church and the world. Christians can respond to God's actions in a poetic manner.

Hoyt L. Hickman, who is a Professor of Worship at both Drew University and Vanderbilt University, defines worship as a celebration of the gospel. During worship,

³⁶ Robert Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1985), 27.

³⁷ James H. Olthuis, *Dancing in the Wild Spaces of Love* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022), 27.

³⁸ Olthuis, *Dancing in the Wild Spaces of Love*, 27.

God calls the church anew through the risen Christ, and the Holy Spirit within members enables them to hear and respond. The call and response rhythms lead individuals to a communion that unites them with God and one another, renewing the Body of Christ for the world.³⁹ The purpose of liturgical creativity is to reveal and celebrate the presence of God's holiness, enabling worshippers to deepen their understanding of God and themselves.

Stepping into religious worship through the path of theopoetics invites the worshipper to embody liturgical practices. When one creates a song or poem that exemplifies the goodness of God, they honor and glorify God through their work. Christians can create and worship God even in the midst of suffering, understanding that all experiences are meaningful and that God can bring good out of traumatic events.

The Book of Psalms contains poems directed towards a social audience, expressing the idea that even amidst heartache, one can still praise YHWH as both Creator and helper.⁴⁰ Poetry is a form of language that is deeply connected to honesty. During worship, the atmosphere becomes potent as participants wholeheartedly engage from their spirits to the Great Spirit. Marilyn Orr, a biographer, studied George Eliot's religious imagination and revealed Eliot's theopoetic approach in the book, *George Eliot's Religious Imagination*:

The most powerful movement of feeling with a liturgy is the prayer which seeks for nothing special, but is a yearning to escape from the limitations of our own weakness and an invocation of all Good to enter and abide with us; or else a self-oblivious lifting up of gladness, a *Gloria in excelsis* that such Good exists, both the yearning and the exultation gathering their utmost force from the sense of

³⁹ Hoyt L. Hickman, *Worshipping with United Methodists Revised Edition* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 9.

⁴⁰ Gale A Yee, Hugh R Page, and Matthew J M Coomber, *Wisdom, Worship, and Poetry* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 588.

communion in a form which has expressed them both, for long generations of struggling fellow-men.⁴¹

In this passage, George Eliot praises the prayer that does not aim to escape from the world but instead wishes to surpass the limitations that stem from human weaknesses. This prayer does not ask for a supernatural being to rescue Christians from the world but rather seeks for the presence of all that is good to be with and remain within God's people. It finds solace in sharing this yearning and rejoicing with others.⁴²

Crafting prayers for worship allows one to express their soul's poetic language directly to God's throne of grace. Prayers have the ability to unleash the immense power of the Holy Spirit. There is poetry that is produced from the heart of prayer. Richard Foster describes praying from one's heart as a sudden rain shower. This shower pours forth unexpectedly and brings a sense of wonder, praise, and unspeakable speech. Foster advises that when this happens, one should not seek protection by putting up an umbrella but rather embrace the moment by standing in the drenching rain of the Father.⁴³

By engaging in worship through theopoetics, one can transcend the mundane and tap into a higher level of spiritual connection. Through its use of imaginative and poetic language, theopoetics offers a unique and powerful means of worshipping God. Theopoetics creates a space for individuals to encounter the Living God and dream dreams that can only be grasped by the church. L. Callid Keefe-Perry has shared a quote by poet William Stafford, in which he expresses his thoughts on worship:

⁴¹ Marilyn Orr, *George Eliot's Religious Imagination* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 134.

⁴² Orr, *George Eliot's Religious Imagination*, 135.

⁴³ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1992), 143.

Church services are poetry from beginning to end; they just are poetry...Religion is serious poetry—which is not to say religion cannot be light-hearted. But at its highest it turns important; and important involvement with language, use of language for significant human experiences, merges inevitably into poetry.⁴⁴

Theopoetics and Missions

As church members express their trauma through cultural arts, they will begin to notice a change within themselves. A change within should lead to an outward change as well. Theopoetics proposes that the way one expresses his or her understanding of the Divine has the power to alter one's experience. It acts as a mediator between one's internal and external worlds, connecting one's perceptions, words, and actions.⁴⁵ Over the past few years, amidst the trauma of a global pandemic, political disagreements, and racial tensions, the Holy Spirit's work has consistently kept the church united and focused on its mission, despite the differences in individual ideologies. The common goal of every Christian is to make disciples of Jesus Christ, and it is this mission that brings the church together in harmony.

Dave Harrity, a writer, author, and teacher from Louisville, KY, believes in the transformative power of theopoetics. Theopoetics involves opening oneself to quiet reflection on God's word and God's Spirit and then using that space to create. According to Harrity, this practice allows one to participate in and manifest God's movement in the world.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ William Stafford, *The Darkness Around Us Is Deep* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1993) 71, quoted in Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 157.

⁴⁵ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 164.

⁴⁶ Dave Harrity, *Making Manifest: On Faith, Creativity, and the Kingdom at Hand* (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed, 2013) 7, quoted in Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 170.

Theopoetics invites individuals to share their experiences of how God calls and displays the Church in the world to serve.⁴⁷ When Christians are healed from within, the Church understands the Holy Spirit as a source of healing, empowerment, and commissioning. The Holy Spirit guides believers on their path towards Christian holiness and sanctification. Being God's active presence in the world, the Holy Spirit operates in and through Christians to reach those who are the most vulnerable and marginalized, with the life-transforming message of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit gives the Church the power for its mission and is the very presence of God in the lives of its members.

Racial reconciliation and social justice are some of the major challenges faced by the Church today, especially in the United States. Over the past few years, the country has witnessed a significant surge in hate crimes targeted towards minorities, social and racial injustices, violent riots, social justice movements, and protests against police brutality. This has led to increased scrutiny of the Church, with people around the world watching closely to see how Christians respond to these issues and whether they speak out against or in support of them.

In his book *Way to Water*, L. Callid Keefe-Perry presents an illustration of a theopoetic approach to social justice. He describes a group of members from a congregation who decide to participate in a public witness protest, carrying signs to express their message.⁴⁸ Keefe-Perry proposes: “Imagine signs with questions— genuine, not sarcastic—not answers. Imagine activists who see their role as one of helping societal consciousness to change, and who believe this needs to happen by helping people connect

⁴⁷ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 170.

⁴⁸ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 166.

the dots.”⁴⁹ Keefe-Perry elaborates on the social transformation that would occur when church members are not required to abandon their beliefs or step back from their positions. Instead, they are encouraged to contemplate the best ways to involve other perspectives in discussions and not just go through the motions.⁵⁰ A theopoetic approach recognizes and values diverse voices as equally created in the image of God, fostering community.

Matt Guynn, a teacher of theopoetics and minister in the Church of the Brethren, beautifully writes about mission from a theopoetic social activist perspective:

Theopoetic social change organizing is about nurturing seeds of God—seeds of personality, of justice, of beauty, and of right relationship. This is the work of a Lover, a Beloved, a Gardener, a Builder. The theopoet seeks to support, undergird, and bless the seed within those she organizes, but ultimately the seed itself is what grows, guided and directed by the imprint/image within.⁵¹

Theopoetic social change is a process that seeks to unlock the power of creativity that exists within communities and individuals. The ultimate goal is to channel this creative energy to effect profound transformation. Rather than keeping these visions and power confined to the page, the objective is to embody them within the everyday realities of the people that the theopoet cares for and relates to.⁵²

Theopoetics becomes even more powerful when it is applied in the real world. This can lead to an inspiring combination of poetry and activism, a mutually beneficial exchange of art and presence, and a yearning for the life that exists both within and

⁴⁹ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 166.

⁵⁰ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 166.

⁵¹ Matt Guynn, "Theopoetics and Social Change," *Cross Currents* 60, no.1 (2010): 13, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/theopoetics-social-change/docview/214931068/>.

⁵² Guynn, "Theopoetics and Social Change," 13.

beyond our absence.⁵³ Theopoetic activists are called upon to nurture the heart, imagination, and spiritual power of people and communities. This is the crux of theopoetic social change - to unlock personal power from within, engage with myth and theology in new ways, and walk with people as they develop programs and initiatives that are rooted in engagement with God and deeply relevant to their own situations.⁵⁴

Poetry has long been intertwined with activism, giving a voice to social issues. One example is poet and professor Marilyn Chin, who powerfully addresses the oppression of Asian women in patriarchal societies through her passion for poetry. In an interview, Chin explains that she embodies a multitude of voices, including historical, ancient, contemporary, and feminist women's voices.⁵⁵ Chin is convinced that she has a calling to tell numerous stories on various levels.

Language has the power to evoke something innate. Words can break through hidden barriers. The world paid attention when the controversial rapper Kanye West released his single "Jesus Walk." In this rap song, Kanye West boldly embraced his conversion to Christianity. The lyrics to the introduction and chorus illustrate how theopoetics can be applied in today's culture:

We at war
We at war with terrorism, racism
But most of all we at war with ourselves

Jesus walk,
God show me the way because the Devil's tryna
break me down
Jesus, walk with me
The only thing I pray is that my feet don't

⁵³ Guynn, "Theopoetics and Social Change," 13.

⁵⁴ Guynn, "Theopoetics and Social Change," 13.

⁵⁵ Bill D. Moyers, *The Language of Life* (New York, NY: Doubleday Books, 1995), 67.

fail me now
 Jesus, walk
 And I don't think there's nothin' I can do now to
 right my wrongs
 Jesus, walk with me
 I wanna talk to God but I'm afraid 'cause we ain't
 spoke in so long⁵⁶

Through his spoken word, Kanye West conveyed his social and religious beliefs, which hold relevance in the field of theopoetics. The inclusive platform of rap music facilitated the spreading of the gospel message to a younger and broader demographic.

Theopoetics presents a new perspective for the church to engage in mission, revealing the present and future reality of the Kingdom of God. As United Methodists, the theological task is to profess the reign of God's Kingdom, both current and coming.

The Book of Discipline states:

United Methodists profess the historic Christian faith in God, incarnate in Jesus Christ for our salvation and ever at work in human history in the Holy Spirit. Living in a covenant of grace under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we participate in the first fruits of God's coming reign and pray in hope for its full realization on earth as in heaven.⁵⁷

Whenever and wherever the will of God is being done, the work of the Kingdom is also being done. As Christians begin the work of healing within themselves, they are presented with unique opportunities to bring healing to others and to proclaim the Kingdom of God. John Wesley's words remind the church of her mission, "the world is our parish."

⁵⁶ Kanye West, "Jesus Walks," *The College Dropout*, Roc-A-Fella Records, 2004.

⁵⁷ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 47.

Conclusion

What if churches could provide a haven for both children and adults to deal with the aftermath of broken relationships and traumatic childhoods? A creative approach is necessary to help people grasp and interpret the Gospel in a unique way. The message of Jesus is incredibly powerful and life-affirming, and the church has a responsibility to communicate this message effectively and in all languages. To do so, the church must explore its imaginative side and reconnect to the poetic expression of language. Church members can utilize poetry as a form of healing to express themselves and prevent self-destruction, thus preserving what they create. Theology and creativity intertwine in theopoetics, offering benefits to rural church members.

Theopoetics is a fresh theological concept that encourages creativity and imagination to explore and connect with God. It has proven to be a valuable tool for pastoral care, fostering spiritual formation, and deepening our comprehension of God's mission for the church. Through the adoption of theopoetics, the church can cultivate a unique and innovative pathway to encountering and engaging with the divine, with particular benefits for those who have experienced trauma. Approaching biblical theology through a theopoetic lens enables individuals to experience the mystery, wonder, and excitement of faith in a more profound and meaningful way.

Utilizing poetry as a means of expressing past trauma has the potential to be a transformative tool for churchgoers, enabling them to rewrite their personal narratives through the power of God's grace. Such a process can heavily influence how individuals engage in worship, as the resulting healing can lead to a greater sense of gratitude and praise towards the Divine. Employing a theopoetic methodology, which encompasses the

use of stories, poetry, and liturgical practices like song, prayer, and dance, believers can authentically bear witness to the presence of Jesus and testify to the Divine's role as both Creator and Healer. Theopoetics offers a means for individuals to establish a connection with the creativity of God during worship. Christians have the opportunity to respond to God's actions in a poetic manner.

Applying theopoetic theology in pastoral care can foster a church culture that prioritizes open expression, attentive listening, and creative solutions in supporting members experiencing trauma. The integration of theopoetics enables pastors to cultivate a safe space where individuals can articulate their pain and aspirations in ways that strengthen relationships within faith communities. When lay members can confide about a profound emotional wound that hinders their spiritual journey, a pastor can encourage them to explore their faith creatively, such as through the instrument of creative writing. This approach allows for a more profound and meaningful engagement with their faith, even amidst suffering.

Theopoetics and mission are intertwined to benefit individuals and communities through the creative force of imagination and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. At the heart of theopoetic social change is the liberation of personal power and the reconstruction of myth and theology. By adopting a theopoetic approach to mission, individuals are equipped to work alongside others, developing initiatives and programs that are grounded in their relationship with God and uniquely tailored to their specific contexts. This empowers them to affect meaningful, relevant change in their communities. Theopoetics offers a unique vantage point that empowers the church to actively participate in the mission of unveiling the current and future reality of God's Kingdom.

When a person experiences unresolved trauma, it can present obstacles in their efforts to connect with faith communities. This can lead to feelings of spiritual isolation among members of the Christian community. Trauma has the ability to affect a person's mind, body, spirit, and voice. If left unexpressed, it may cause them to withdraw from community engagement and remain silent. Emotional pain can hinder their ability to work with God in the work of creation, while grief can hinder personal growth and the capacity to understand and process the teachings of the Gospel. This understanding can be transformative, benefiting both the individual and their community.

When the church facilitates a venue for its members to engage in cultural arts expression workshops, it presents an opportunity for them to voice their experiences of life, whether good or bad. The foundation for a deeper understanding of God and self in every season of life, is Theopoetics, as embodied in the following poem:

Interruptions

The phone call,
the snowfall,
or the branch that breaks.

The hand that turns the doorknob
or the deer that runs in front.

It's the heartache,
the betrayal,
the kiss on the cheek.

It was the light that turned red
when her son was hijacked
and killed for his car.
I remember Ms. Jones, who wept out loud
and refused to leave the funeral home.
She said her son's death
was an unwelcome interruption.

It's the apology,
the gravestone,
or the detour along the road.

It's the prayer offering,
the handshake,
the lifting of the veil.

It's the red robin in winter,
the salve of forgiveness,
the morning when you wake
to a sudden healing.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Unpublished poem written by the author of this research project.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

Writing is like a wellspring that pours out healing water, allowing the soul to drink deep and quench its thirst. Language arts is not just a mere tool but rather it can be a transformative gateway to unlocking the deeper understanding of life's journeys. Through writing, one can explore and reflect on the intricacies of faith, the depths of heartache, and the reality of one's journey every day. Susan Zimmerman, the author of *Writing to Heal the Soul*, writes: "Only through writing could I appreciate my life's complex tapestry; only through writing could I come to a place where I embraced my life and everything in it."¹ Traumatic experiences can intersect and impact one's life in unforeseen ways. Unresolved trauma hinders spiritual growth and recovery is needed. Writing is a way to move toward healing.

Trauma is defined as a person's emotional response to a distressing experience, according to *Psychology Today*.² For Christians, some situations and trials can test their beliefs, causing physical, emotional, and spiritual distress. Life can be unpredictable and harsh, throwing unexpected and difficult challenges in one's path, such as the sudden death of a loved one, discovering a spouse's betrayal, surviving abuse, or being diagnosed

¹ Susan Zimmermann, *Writing to Heal the Soul: Transforming Grief and Loss through Writing* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2002), 15.

² "Trauma," *Psychology Today*, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/trauma>.

with a progressive and incurable illness. During these moments of despair, Jesus' words can guide those who trust in him, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 ESV). Jesus' followers can expect suffering in this world as tribulations cannot be avoided on this side of heaven.

It can be challenging to cope when life takes a complete turn opposite to the direction it seems to be heading. It is essential to find a way to understand how circumstances and faith are connected. However, it is not always easy to do so, especially when overwhelmed by sadness and grief. In moments like these, grief can silence the voice, making it difficult to express the anguish of the soul.

In the book on loss titled *Superhero Grief: The Transformative Power of Loss*, the editors engage in a discussion about the intricacies of grief. They express that "loss challenges the narratives or life stories we have relied on for guidance. Grieving is the emotional journey of understanding the lessons of loss and reconstructing our life story in a way that is sustainable for us now."³ During periods of mourning, the articulation of one's story of loss is needed for the process of healing. Language arts can help individuals find a way to express what the soul is yearning to say, whether it is a shout, a whisper, or something in between.

Art therapy is a beautiful method of healing trauma that utilizes artistic approaches to address emotional wounds and improve overall well-being. Engaging in creative writing sessions and gaining a deeper appreciation for the arts can promote

³ Jill Harrington and Robert A. Neimeyer, *Superhero Grief: The Transformative Power of Loss* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 61.

health and wholeness, particularly within rural communities. Art therapy utilizes creative expression as a safe means to explore both unconscious and conscious issues and beliefs.

In her book *Raising Self-Esteem in Adults*, Susan Buchalter states, "Creative expression through art provides individuals with the freedom to represent their inner and outer worlds in the way they choose."⁴ In Preston County, people are hurting and searching for something different. Faith communities that offer an organic approach to recovery can support and help in the healing journey of others. The framework selected for the interdisciplinary foundation is art therapy, specifically focusing on creative writing.

This chapter will highlight the use of creative writing therapy as a component of healing ministry. The roots of numerous creative art therapies can be traced back to ancient Greek civilization and the philosophies of Aristotle.⁵ Poetry writing, music, and art were used alongside horticulture as therapeutic tools in the 1800s.⁶

Art therapy as a tool for healing has been well documented. In the studies completed, individuals who wrote about personal struggles for only fifteen minutes a day over three or four days visited doctors for health concerns less regularly and reported a greater sense of well-being.⁷ Writing about traumatic and emotional experiences has a positive effect. According to a 2019 study on the effects of writing therapy, participants in a six-week writing workshop reported an increase in resilience and a decrease in stress

⁴ Susan Buchalter, *Raising Self-Esteem in Adults: An Eclectic Approach with Art Therapy, CBT and DBT Based Techniques* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015), 15.

⁵ Sally D. Bailey, *Creative Arts Therapy Careers* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 1.

⁶ Bailey, *Creative Arts Therapy Careers*, 1.

⁷ Deborah Siegel-Acevedo, "Writing Can Help Us Heal from Trauma," *Harvard Business Review* (July 2021), <https://hbr.org/2021/07/writing-can-help-us-heal-from-trauma>.

among those reporting trauma in the past year.⁸ Faith communities can facilitate healing when individuals connect creatively on a spiritual level.

Creative workshops and a deeper appreciation of art therapy can help foster healing amongst individuals suffering from trauma. In her book, *Introduction to Art Therapy: Sources and Resources*, Judith A. Rubin writes, “Art therapy, drawing as art has from time immemorial on the human spirit, offers a most appealing avenue for authentic expressions of the soul. Even the most rational among us knows of the deep inner well from which we draw when we express ourselves.”⁹ Human beings are created with a well of creative expression. People who have lost their sense of self-worth and identity due to painful experiences can rediscover and tap into this well. The well was created by the Creator. In this unique relationship humans have with God, humans can express themselves in various artistic ways. Jesus is the Supreme Artist who continually shapes humanity into God’s artwork.¹⁰ The spiritual aspect of art therapy will emphasize the transformative work of Christ.

What is Art Therapy?

The American Art Therapy Association defines art therapy in the following manner:

Art therapy is the therapeutic use of art making, within a professional relationship, by people who experience illness, trauma, or challenges in living, and by people who seek personal development. Through creating art and reflecting on the art products and processes, people can increase awareness of self and others cope

⁸ Siegel-Acevedo, “Writing Can Help Us Heal from Trauma.”

⁹ Judith A. Rubin, *Introduction to Art Therapy: Sources and Resources* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 113.

¹⁰ Weber, *Living in the Image of Christ*, 64.

with symptoms, stress, and traumatic experiences; enhance cognitive abilities; and enjoy life-affirming pleasures of making art.¹¹

Adrian Hill, a UK artist, is widely considered to be the pioneer of art therapy. He coined the term to describe the therapeutic use of creating art in the 1940s.¹² During his recovery from tuberculosis, Hill discovered the healing power of artistic expression, particularly through drawing and painting. He found that the creative process helped him to feel more positive and resilient, stating that it allowed him to “build up a strong defense against his misfortunes.”¹³ Art therapy played a crucial role in Hill’s well-being.

Margaret Naumberg, an American psychologist and artist, started using the term "art therapy" to describe her work in the United States during the same time that Adrian Hill was promoting the benefits of art therapy in the UK.¹⁴ Naumberg’s art therapy model encouraged patients to express their unconscious thoughts and feelings through art, which facilitated communication between the patient and therapist.¹⁵ This approach was also supported by Adrian Hill, who believed that art could connect people and promote healing.

In his book *Art Therapy*, David Edwards raises the question of whether the creative process or the therapist-client relationship is primarily responsible for therapeutic

¹¹ David G. Edwards, *Art Therapy* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2013), 5.

¹² Edwards, *Art Therapy*, 2.

¹³ Adrian Hill, *Art Versus Illness* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1948) 103, quoted in Edwards, *Art Therapy*, 2.

¹⁴ Margaret Naumberg, *Dynamically Oriented Art Therapy: Its Principles and Practice* (New York, NY: Grune and Stratton, 1966) 17, quoted in Edwards, *Art Therapy*, 2.

¹⁵ Edwards, *Art Therapy*, 2.

change in art therapy.¹⁶ Many therapists argue that it is a combination of both factors, which is referred to as the "triangular relationship" in art therapy.¹⁷ A triangle visually conveys that the therapeutic process is connectional rather than linear. In Figure 1, it shows the interconnected relationship between the client, therapist, and artwork.¹⁸

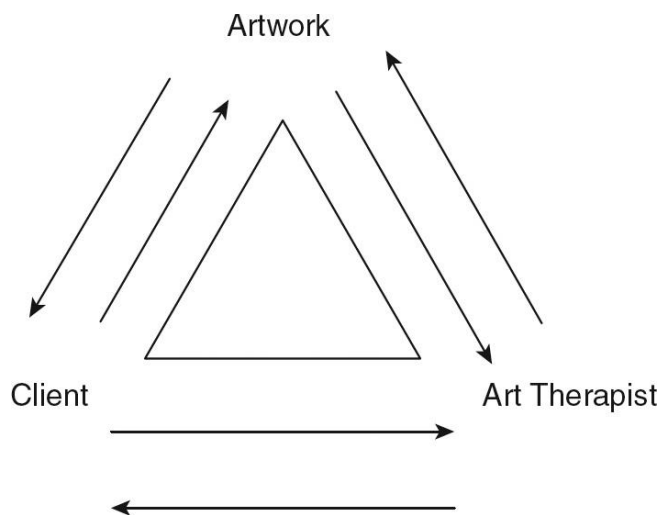


Figure 1. Triangular Relationship in Art Therapy.

Art therapy is a powerful way to explore thoughts, feelings, knowledge, understanding, and memories. This theory can be applied to pastoral care in rural churches for members who struggle to express past or present trauma. As a form of art therapy, therapeutic writing can be particularly effective in fostering open and productive discussions about emotions between clergy and laity. This theory can strengthen relationships within the church and provide spiritual breakthroughs that allow church

¹⁶ Edwards, *Art Therapy*, 3.

¹⁷ "Inscape," *Journal of the British Association of Art Therapists*, Winter 1990: 20—26, quoted in Edwards, *Art Therapy*, 3.

¹⁸ Edwards, *Art Therapy*, 4.

members to deepen their faith. Every member of the body of Christ has a story within them and a story to write. Author and writing teacher Leslie Leyland Fields states, “Every time we lock away a person, an event, or even an entire decade in the Closet of Forgetting and Denial, we rob ourselves of the strength and wisdom that can come from those experiences.”¹⁹ All life experiences, both good and bad, are equally important.

Fields reflect on these moments by saying:

Those events came to us, I believe, with some kind of meaning, maybe even purpose. If God is in and through our stories, surely he means something by the “burden of our witnessing.” Just as we’ve been shepherded into pastures by quiet rivers and through shadowed valleys, we get to shepherd and steward these burdens, all of them – the beautiful, the brilliant, and the horrid. Through telling and writing, we have another chance to reclaim and redeem those moments. And sometimes they are redeemed simply by being faced and called out of the dark. When we can name our ghosts. They haunt us less.²⁰

One’s past holds meaning and purpose, just as the future does. Art therapy, through creative writing, allows that space for one to share his or her story.

A small group that promotes creative art therapy would be a valuable addition to any church community and a way to include people from diverse backgrounds. In 2016, a study on group creative arts therapy for adults with autism spectrum disorder demonstrated that participants showed improvements or developments in skills related to communication, self-awareness, and decision-making.²¹ Art therapy can strengthen relationships within the church and provide spiritual breakthroughs that allow church members to deepen their faith.

¹⁹ Leslie Leyland Fields, *Your Story Matters: Finding, Writing and Living the Truth of Your Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2021), 20.

²⁰ Fields, *Your Story Matters*, 20.

²¹ Beth Gonzalez-Dolginko, *Art Therapy with Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (New York: NY: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019), 45.

Art Therapy and Biblical Foundations

After experiencing trauma, individuals who were created in God's likeness can reclaim the goodness of their identity by practicing written exercises. The creative process of art allows for a journey of self-discovery and realization rooted in biblical foundations, much like how God creates. Trauma can often hinder self-discovery, moving forward within a faith community, and conforming to the image of Christ. The memories of painful experiences are usually stored and relived within the mind. However, art therapy can help in reconstructing these memories by reconstructing one's story, as explained by psychiatrist Judith Herman. Herman suggests that the process of therapy with trauma victims starts with reconstructing the story, and a narrative that does not include traumatic imagery and bodily sensations is barren and incomplete.²² In art therapy, writing through the trauma is essential in recreating the story.

Christians are actively engaged in shaping and reshaping the world in which they reside. Writing provides a way for a person to fully engage in his or her tragedy, to step into the written word and allow the pages to be a place of reflection and understanding. Danish author of her memoir, *Out of Africa*, Isak Dinesen has said, "Any sorrow can be borne, if you can turn into a story."²³ Trauma victims within the church who understand the Genesis account can continue to be shaped by the Creator's hands, even amid heartache and suffering.

²² Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1992) 177, quoted in Kathleen Adams, and Kate Thompson, *Expressive Writing: Foundations of Practice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 64.

²³ Isak Dinesen, *Out of Africa* (London: Putnam, 1937) quoted in Zimmermann, *Writing to Heal the Soul*, 26.

The book *Expressive Writing* by Kate Thompson and Kathleen Adams, explains that according to Susan Feldman, there are four stages of writing in trauma: defensive, conventional, conflictual, and authentic.²⁴ Initially, the trauma survivor may write defensively and then become more conventional in expressing his or her emotions. In the third stage, the survivor moves towards conflictual writing, where they express the contradictions and paradoxes of the traumatic event. This stage leads to the final stage of healing, which is acceptance and authenticity. In the authentic stage, the writing uses specific, concrete, and detailed imagery to process the trauma.²⁵ This project aims to encourage members of the faith community to participate in a cultural arts expression workshop, in order to gain the confidence to articulate their experiences with trauma.

In the Genesis account of the creation of the world, God, the Ultimate Artist, created in stages and declared creation "good" upon completion. Similarly, when applying art therapy through writing, there are ten principles of transformative writing as described by Sherry Reiter, a clinical social worker and poetry therapist. According to Reiter, the ten principles of transformative writing are not rules, but rather observable components that are particularly effective in treating trauma because they address specific symptoms.²⁶ Incorporating these ten principles within a creative writing

²⁴ Susan Feldman, David Read Johnson, and Marilyn Ollayos, *Handbook of Post-Traumatic Therapy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994) 366- 385, quoted in Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 64.

²⁵ Feldman, Johnson, and Ollayos, *Handbook of Post-Traumatic Therapy*, 366-385, quoted in Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 64.

²⁶ Sherry Reiter, *Writing Away the Demons: Stories of Creative Coping through Transformative Writing* (St. Cloud, MN: North Star Press, 2009) 2, quoted in Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 65.

environment can help cultivate healing and enable Christians to move forward in accomplishing good works that God has prepared for them.

The first principle of writing is mastery, as it empowers the writer. Throughout history, many civilizations believed that naming someone or something gave them magical possession or power over it.²⁷ Similarly, writing helps to identify and organize thoughts and feelings, giving the writer a sense of control. In the book *Art Therapy and the Creative Process: A Practical Approach*, the authors share how a man named Bob Rich, used creative writing to assist in his recovery from PTSD without even knowing it. When writing his fiction novel, Rich experienced a sense of healing through the process of writing in that he created a reality that he had control over.²⁸

In the case of trauma, writing can be beneficial in giving the survivor a sense of empowerment. Finding the words to reconstruct traumatic experiences and create meaning from them, the survivor becomes a victor rather than a victim.²⁹ This aligns with the biblical concept of being created in God's image, as image bearers who embody Christ's triumph over adversity. This principle also applies to the act of writing. One can write through adversity and find meaning within the words one writes.

Ritual is the second principle that Reither emphasizes. As humans, we tend to create rituals during times of change to cope with the resulting anxiety and give meaning

²⁷ Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 65.

²⁸ Cynthia Pearson, Samuel Mann, and Alfredo Zotti, *Art Therapy and the Creative Process: A Practical Approach* (Ann Arbor, MI: Loving Healing Press, 2016), 74.

²⁹ Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 65.

to life transitions.³⁰ The significance of these rituals lies in their ability to acknowledge deep-seated emotions and the need for connection to oneself, one's community, and the sacred.³¹ Writing workshops, in particular, provide an excellent setting to recreate such rituals, allowing for a healing experience that is truly sacred.

The third principle is safety, which emphasizes the importance of a journal serving as a secure sanctuary for all thoughts, whether expressed through poetry or prose.³² Language can be used as a means of self-communication when it is not solely focused on communication with others.³³ By writing in a journal, the words are meant for the writer's eyes only, and trust is established when the writing environment provides a safe space for self-expression. Creative writing is often seen as a healing art because it helps to reconcile conflicts, express emotions, and share beliefs and values.³⁴ Every participant attending the creative writing workshop will receive a journal as a gift for participating.

In trauma recovery, one of the tasks is to reclaim essential freedoms that may have been sacrificed.³⁵ The fourth principle, freedom, plays a significant role in this process. Writing can be a therapeutic practice because it offers the freedom to choose a

³⁰ Jeanne Achterberg and Barbara Dossey, *Rituals of Magic: Using Imagery for Health and Wellness* (New York, NY: Bantam, 1994) 90, quoted in Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 65.

³¹ Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 65.

³² Jack Leedy and Sherry Reiter, "The Use of Poetry in Drama Therapy," in *Drama in Therapy*, vol 2 (New York, NY: Drama Book Specialists, 1981) 221-40, quoted in Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 66.

³³ Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 66.

³⁴ Buchalter, *Raising Self-Esteem in Adults*, 188.

³⁵ Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 67.

poetic act. As a writer, one can create a different story or ending to the current one, exercising one's freedom to express oneself creatively.³⁶ The act of writing provides a means for survivors of trauma to recapture the sense of independence that may have been lost in their silence.

The fifth principle is the power of poetry. Poetic devices can have a therapeutic effect by creating a form that is so pleasing to the mind that it can bypass the natural resistance and reach the subconscious.³⁷ In art, symbolism is portrayed through images, and in poetry, metaphors are used. According to Dr. Reither, a "metaphor is like a drawbridge that allows us to enter the castle of the psyche where deep emotions and thoughts reside."³⁸ Writing poetry can help children and adults access and express what lies beneath the surface of trauma.

In the art of transformative writing, venting and containment hold significant weight as the sixth principle. Putting thoughts into words not only expresses them but also contains them. According to Reither, words, emotions, and memories can pose a greater threat when they remain invisible.³⁹ However, by penning them down and securing them in a journal, individuals can revisit them safely whenever they choose.

The seventh principle is creativity. This theory suggests that trauma is fundamentally an act of destruction; writing, in contrast, serves symbolically as an act of

³⁶ Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 67.

³⁷ Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 67.

³⁸ Reiter, *Writing Away the Demons*, 2, quoted in Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 67.

³⁹ Reiter, *Writing Away the Demons*, 2, quoted in Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 67.

creation.⁴⁰ Creativity allows individuals to overcome their psychological and spiritual limitations.⁴¹ Tapping into one's God-given imagination is what brings forth creativity. Ultimately, the creation narrative invites one to see themselves as part of a larger, divine creative process. The church can encourage its members to creatively engage with God in renewing, healing, and creating the world according to God's vision.

The eighth principle pertains to the act of witnessing. By putting one's thoughts and emotions on paper, one can create a record of life experiences.⁴² Those who have experienced trauma can find solace in writing, as it allows them to externalize their emotions. While a personal journal can serve as a witness, group writing sessions can also provide validation from multiple witnesses.⁴³ A witness can validate one's truth. Those who suffer from abuse or grief may feel unheard. Words serve as a witness to one's truth.

The ninth principle of integration emphasizes the importance of bringing together various components to form a cohesive whole.⁴⁴ Writing serves as a powerful tool in linking thoughts and emotions, enabling one to gain deeper insight and knowledge. As individuals express themselves through writing and engage in self-discovery, they develop a heightened awareness of their true selves, with the process facilitated by the

⁴⁰ Robert Jay Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 525-526, quoted in Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 68.

⁴¹ Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, 525-526, quoted in Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 68.

⁴² Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 69.

⁴³ Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 69.

⁴⁴ Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 69.

observing ego.⁴⁵ The act of writing can clarify the intricacies of past issues or relationships and reveal the genuine motives and contextual factors that underlie traumatic events. This process of exploration and reflection can facilitate a deeper understanding of such experiences.

The tenth principle is the theory of self and relativity, also known as self-in-the-world.⁴⁶ The term "theory of self" refers to having a cohesive self-image where the many aspects, voices, and images connect to form an integrated whole.⁴⁷ A cohesive self-image allows for a connection to the larger world, which can help shift the victim's relationship with their trauma. Relativity or connection refers to the ability to relate and connect with the larger world.⁴⁸ As told in the creation story of Genesis, the process of creation is characterized by an intricate interconnection of all aspects of the earth. Consequently, people and nature are bound by a cooperative relationship that must be maintained and cared for. Writing exercises provide a way to explore self-image and connections to the world.

Numerous case studies illustrate the positive benefits of transformative writing when applying these ten principles. Art therapy enables one to process grief and traumatic events that can reconnect one to his or her true identity, that of the image of God, which is restored. It is important to remember that lasting transformation can only

⁴⁵ Abigail Chance, "Polyphonic Feminisms: Acting in Concert," *The Scholar and the Feminist Online*, 2011, <http://elevateddifference.com/review/online-issue-83>, quoted in Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 69.

⁴⁶ Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 69.

⁴⁷ Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 70.

⁴⁸ Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 70.

take place with the power of Christ. Art therapy allows Christians to become partners with Christ in this transformative work which involves the act of creation.

Art Therapy and Historical Foundations

The research from the historical foundation delved into the life of William Cowper, who experienced severe anxiety and depression that can be traced back to traumatic events in his childhood. As previously discussed in earlier chapters, anxiety is a common struggle for individuals of all ages. The Covid pandemic has further highlighted the prevalence of anxiety and depression, particularly among young people aged ten to fifteen who experienced heightened loneliness. This impact was particularly pronounced among girls. The lasting psychological effects of trauma on young people, as exemplified in William Cowper's life, cannot be denied. While many church members silently carry the burden of past and present grief and trauma, art therapy can offer a valuable outlet for expression.

While art therapy is a helpful tool in aiding mental health, it should never be treated as a substitute for professional mental healthcare. William Cowper sought professional help with his mental suffering. Through this process, he discovered that creative writing became a beneficial tool for his well-being and helped to anchor his emotions. Cowper's relationship with John Newton was also a significant source of support for his writing and health. Through their partnership, they produced many uplifting hymns and poems that continue to inspire readers today.

Art therapy is intricately connected to spirituality. Art therapists who work with individuals in recovery programs use poetry and inspirational writing as tools for spiritual

transformation, cultivating imagination and creative capacity.⁴⁹ William Cowper utilized his creative writing to strengthen his connection with God and spread the gospel, which ultimately brought him a sense of security and improved mental health. Art therapy has been theorized to enhance well-being by boosting positive emotions, improving relationships, offering opportunities for engagement, and shedding light on purpose and meaning.⁵⁰ Rural communities can significantly benefit from art therapy exposure since it can be applied to diverse populations at different treatment stages and across various settings.

William Cowper suffered from grief and abandonment as a result of a traumatic life-changing event. At the early age of six years old, Cowper's mother died, and he was immediately shipped to a boarding school to receive his formal education. Grief fractured and froze William Cowper's mind, body, and soul. The questions and confusion that settled in Cowper's mind could not be articulated, creating a sense for him that his world was unsafe.

Art therapy can help individuals articulate grief and express difficult emotions. Studies within person-centered expressive arts therapy suggest that feelings of grief, anger, pain, fear, and joy are the tunnel through which one must pass to get to the other side to discover self-awareness, understanding, and wholeness.⁵¹ Such feelings and

⁴⁹ Libby Schmanke, *Art Therapy and Substance Abuse: Enabling Recovery from Alcohol and Other Drug Addiction* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017), 151.

⁵⁰ John Sommers-Flanagan, "The Development and Evolution of Person-Centered Expressive Art Therapy: A Conversation with Natalie Rogers," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 85, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 120–25, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2007.tb00454.x>.

⁵¹ Sommers-Flanagan, *Development and Evolution of Person-Centered Expressive Art Therapy*, 247.

emotions are an energy source that can be channeled into the expressive arts to be released and transformed.⁵² Unexpressed grief and trauma must be released as a means for one to move forward in life and into a space of newfound discovery of self, acceptance, faith, and love.

The book *The Passion Driven Congregation*, by E. Carver McGriff and Dr. M. Kent Millard, supports the use of art therapy in congregational settings, as demonstrated in a powerful story about grief. Dr. Millard recounts his experience when he served as the senior pastor of St. Luke's United Methodist Church. During that time, a man from his congregation passed away in a plane crash, leaving behind his wife, a twenty-one-year-old son, and a thirteen-year-old daughter, who were all grieving. The thirteen-year-old daughter, whose name was Brooke, was broken by the loss of her father and grieving deeply. Thankfully, a therapist was a member of Dr. Millard's congregation, who overtime helped and supported Brooke to express her pain and anger over the death of her father. The therapist understood that children and youth grieve differently from adults and need to find a way to process their grief.⁵³

Brooke created a booklet to help her process her grief and move forward. The booklet was her work, written and illustrated by her. One evening, Dr. Millard sat down with Brooke to review the booklet together. Each page described the journey of a little girl whose father had been killed in a car accident. Brooke had drawn pictures to illustrate the story. One of the illustrations showed the little girl crying on her bed. The book

⁵² Sommers-Flanagan, *Development and Evolution of Person-Centered Expressive Art Therapy*, 247.

⁵³ E. Carver McGriff, and M. Kent Millard, *The Passion Driven Congregation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 57.

contained several illustrations depicting the little girl's experiences at school after losing her father. One illustration showed her confronting classmates who were unkind to her because of her loss. Another illustration showed her in the principal's office, where she shared the news of her father's death. The final illustration showed the principal comforting the little girl and sharing that she, too, had lost her father when she was young. The words at the end of the book read, "Now the principal is my friend."⁵⁴

Dr. Millard understood the importance of creating a space in the community to help grieving children and teenagers. As a result, the therapist started "Brooke's Place," which meets every Thursday, hosting around eighty to ninety youth, along with about twenty to twenty-five counselors and volunteers throughout Indiana. Dr. Millard writes: "If we take seriously the idea that the image of God is a spark of God's spirit within each of us and that the kingdom of God abides within us, then the role of the church is to recognize, encourage, coach, and fuel that flame within each member of the congregation."⁵⁵ Art therapy is a powerful ministry that can be incorporated into the life of the church. In rural areas where therapy for youth and adults is insufficient or obsolete, art therapy can inspire hope and healing by reminding the hopeless and the hurting of the divine spark within them as image bearers.

Art therapy involving collaborative writing can foster life-giving relationships and create an atmosphere of vulnerability needed in therapy. As seen in the relationship between William Cowper and John Newton, when authentic relationships are developed, whether between a therapist and patient or clergy and laity, honest expression can occur

⁵⁴ McGriff and Millard, *The Passion Driven Congregation*, 58.

⁵⁵ McGriff and Millard, *The Passion Driven Congregation*, 57.

through creative writing methods. The written word can be shared to bless and heal the writer and the listener and provide newfound insight and understanding. Cowper and Newton inspired and supported each other's creative work. As previously stated, engaging in private journaling is a crucial component of writing therapy, and the output generated in solitude can be incredibly valuable. Nevertheless, participating in a community, such as a faith-based group, can provide individuals with love, genuine feedback, inspiration, and accountability in a secure group environment while participating in the creative writing process.

Susan Zimmerman's written works underscore the significance of learning from others. She notes, "... as we talk about what we write, we become more aware of other people's gems. People we might dismiss without a thought reveal themselves to us, often in stunning ways. They become three-dimensional as we listen. And they become inspirations: if they can do it, so can we."⁵⁶ Moreover, Zimmerman sheds light on how sharing stories with others can help one gain valuable perspective. Zimmerman writes:

We begin to understand that while our road has been rugged, we are not alone. We find people who have struggled more, who have taken on even greater challenges. We're inspired by the way they've chosen to chart their difficult courses. We see their strength and humanity, and it helps us find our own.⁵⁷

In the faith community, aging members have stories they want to share, lessons learned from past trauma to educate others. The church would greatly benefit in offering a writing group for the aging community. Collaborative art therapy for aging adults is found to be beneficial to their health and overall wellbeing. Aging adults are often a

⁵⁶ Zimmermann, *Writing to Heal the Soul*, 41.

⁵⁷ Zimmermann, *Writing to Heal the Soul*, 41.

forgotten community, especially when they are in home health care institutions. Often there is a lack of resources such as education and training, infrastructure and space, transportation options and mobility support, and staff and volunteers to carry out arts-based programming close to older adult homes, whether living in the community or residential care environments.⁵⁸ Offering opportunities for aging adults to immersed in creative writing collaboration would be a vital ministry in many churches, especially in areas that lack cultural arts exposure.

Referring back to the story of Creation, when God created Adam and Eve, it is evident that God values relationships. Even today, God continues to provide for humanity by giving us the Word, the Spirit, and the community. The church is called to act on what God has offered to navigate life, and this includes all stages of life. Research has demonstrated the benefits of art therapy for older adults as well. Erin Patridge, who holds a PhD in art therapy and is a board-certified registered art therapist, explains that art therapy can help older adults express and communicate their strengths. Additionally, it serves as a valuable means for them to continue developing and growing their strengths.⁵⁹ Throughout history, it has been proven that private and collaborative writing creates a pathway for the Spirit to administer truths, edification, inspiration, and healing for the common good of all.

⁵⁸ Rachel Herron, Rachel Bar, and Mark Skinner, *Dance, Aging and Collaborative Arts-Based Research* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 2.

⁵⁹ Erin Patridge, *Art Therapy with Older Adults: Connected and Empowered* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019), 19.

Art Therapy and Theological Foundations

The art therapy theory connects beautifully with the research in the theological foundations centered around the act of creation. Exploring and connecting with God through creativity and imagination is at the heart of theopoetics, an innovative theological concept. It has proven to be a valuable tool for pastoral care, fostering spiritual formation through relationships and deepening our comprehension of God's mission for the church. Theopoetics opens new avenues for spiritual growth and understanding by encouraging a more constructive approach to theology. Through the adoption of theopoetics, the church can cultivate a unique and innovative pathway to encounter and engage with the divine, with particular benefits for those who have experienced trauma.

Utilizing poetic writing to express past trauma can be a transformative tool for churchgoers, enabling them to rewrite their personal narratives through the power of God's grace. The healing power of poetic arts medicine is ancient and encompasses body, mind, and spirit.⁶⁰ Individuals experiencing physical or emotional distress may find solace in the poetic Psalms of the Old Testament. These ancient texts have been a source of comfort for centuries, offering wisdom that can ease the mind and soothe the soul.

Although it may seem unusual, according to the National Association for Poetry Therapy, ancient Egyptian temples once prescribed words as medicine. The infirm would actually ingest words inscribed on papyrus as a form of healing.⁶¹ And, even more curious, in Greek mythology, Apollo, the god of medicine and healing, was also

⁶⁰ Eric J. Green, and Athena A Drewes, *Integrating Expressive Arts and Play Therapy with Children and Adolescents* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2014), 205.

⁶¹ National Association for Poetry Therapy. (n.d.). www.poetrytherapy.org/index.html, quoted in Green and Drewes, *Integrating Expressive Arts*, 205.

considered the patron of poetry.⁶² How intriguing that words, in both cultures, were seen as a remedy in such an unexpected way. Poetry therapy, a branch of art therapy, sometimes called bibliotherapy, creative writing therapy, or expressive writing, is the purposeful use of literature to promote health and healing.⁶³

Similar to the theology of theopoetics, which focuses on language, form, experience, and imagination, poetry therapy uses creative language, and when utilized within a faith community, it enables people to reflect the Imago Dei and respond to Christ's calling. A practical methodology for implementing poetry therapy is to employ the theopoetic framework, which advocates utilizing poetic expression as a vehicle for exploring and understanding faith and suffering. This particular approach can potentially cultivate profound relationships with oneself, society, and spirituality.

According to poet Pat Schneider, MFA, founder and director of emerita of Amherst Writers & Artists, believes that the desire to create is inherent in every human being. When this desire is suppressed, life can become distorted.⁶⁴ This is also true for clergy and laity who are unable to express their grief and suffering, which can lead to a distorted sense of identity. Sometimes, people are unaware that their emotions and feelings can impact their beliefs. Language arts can help in such situations. Poetry therapy, which involves creating poems, can help people bring their unexpressed

⁶² Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1969) 29, quoted in Green and Drewes, *Integrating Expressive Arts*, 206.

⁶³ N. Mazza, *Poetry Therapy: Theory and Practice* (New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge, 2003) 8, quoted in Green and Drewes, *Integrating Expressive Arts*, 207.

⁶⁴ Pat Schneider, *The Writer as an Artist: A New Approach to Writing Alone and with Others* (Los Angeles, CA: Lowell House, 1993) 107, quoted in Green and Drewes, *Integrating Expressive Arts*, 209.

emotions and thoughts to the surface. Poet Wendy Warren Rosenberg explains in her poem the healing that occurs through poetry:

Poetry rises to every occasion
 Poetry honors all emotions and feelings
 Poetry is a sacred place for words to gather
 Poetry speaks out loud ... or whispers in your ear
 Poetry is a drawer you can pull open and unfold
 its contents
 Poetry is a bicycle with handlebars you can
 grab onto and a horn that beckons you to pay
 attention
 Poetry is a way to communicate when talking doesn't
 suffice
 Poetry reaches into places unreachable by other means
 Poetry is words standing side by side holding hands
 Poetry is words blowing in a field of tall grass
 Poetry sits on the seat of your imagination
 You can dig into your life with poetry.⁶⁵

Like theopoetics, poetry therapy is a powerful tool for theological discussion, especially in comprehending God's essence and attributes through crafting poetry. Words act as symbolic representations of the tangible and intangible realms we occupy.⁶⁶ They are harnessed to construct and reveal the significance of our being, encounters, and purpose. Poetry serves as an instrument that helps one express the mystery and magnificence of God, as well as the journey of faith. Theopoetics encourages one to think creatively about faith and his or her relationship with Jesus, and poetry is the perfect vessel to convey such imagination into words.

⁶⁵ Wendy Warren Rosenberg, *In the Waiting* (Georgetown, KY: Finishing Line Press, 2014), 4, quoted in Green and Drewes, *Integrating Expressive Arts*, 207.

⁶⁶ Green and Drewes, *Integrating Expressive Arts*, 209.

Poetry therapy extends beyond poetry itself and encompasses a variety of creative verbal expressions, including stories, essays, plays, songs, and movies.⁶⁷ Similarly, a theopoetic approach provides a means for individuals to express their faith in God through the use of stories, poetry, and liturgical practices such as song, prayer, and dance. This approach encourages Christians to bear witness and testify to the Divine as they experience faith's mystery, wonder, and excitement more creatively and meaningfully. When working with children who have experienced trauma, poetry therapy involves using poetry and stories to create a safe space for them to explore their thoughts and feelings. This approach helps children maintain a safe distance while allowing them to express emotions that may be too difficult or painful to articulate.⁶⁸

Children often carry emotional baggage from home into their classroom, which can affect their behavior and learning. Poetry can be used as a therapeutic tool to connect with them and help them explore their feelings. A case study highlights how reading or dramatizing a poem about an emotion, such as sulking, can be effective. After reading the poem several times, questions are asked to encourage discussion and reflection, such as "How did that feel?" and "Did the poem remind you of anything?" Children can then create their own poems using a word or phrase, which can be a meaningful way for them to express themselves.⁶⁹ The utilization of the Psalms or other religious poetry within a faith-based youth organization can also serve as a means of prompting theological discourse through the application of poetic methodologies.

⁶⁷ Green and Drewes, *Integrating Expressive Arts*, 208.

⁶⁸ Green and Drewes, *Integrating Expressive Arts*, 210.

⁶⁹ Green and Drewes, *Integrating Expressive Arts*, 222.

Another case study involved an individual confronted with a significant health issue and transformed a piece of poetry into a prayer. Sister Mary was diagnosed with a tumor that was wrapped around her nasal cavity that, after surgery, risked leaving her permanently disabled. Sister Mary began writing to gain a sense of control over her situation. Writing served as a container to hold an array of emotions. As a poetic device, Sister Mary used personification when addressing the tumor directly in her poem. The health crisis she faced affected not only her body but also her soul. The crisis she faced posed a challenge to her identity as a Christian and also tested her faith.

Prior to the operation, Sister Mary wrote what she called her breakthrough poem titled, *Surroundings*:

God sounds out my soul
tosses down a line
measures the depth of my faith
How far down before bottom reached
Are there fathoms enough to carry me to shore
Will I capsize
I snivel in fear
cast a line up
into the heart of God
Trust with invincible hope
I will run out of line.⁷⁰

Sister Mary's poem portrayed her as a boat, sailing through the sea of darkness, which then turned into a sea of God's love. The poem was more than just words for her; it became her prayer. Sister Mary experienced a significant breakthrough and felt an

⁷⁰ Reiter, *Writing Away the Demons*, 127, quoted in Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 74.

immense surge of power after writing it. The process of creating the poem helped her to express her emotions, confront her fears, and strengthen her relationship with God.⁷¹

Numerous case studies demonstrate the effectiveness of art therapy in helping individuals process emotions and reflect on their faith during times of crisis and trauma. Journaling every day can provide Christians with a sense of calm and clarity. Journaling offers individuals the opportunity to reflect on and process deep emotional wounds and past traumatic experiences. For instance, a woman may carry feelings of guilt, shame, and secrecy after an abortion. Author Pat Layton emphasizes that abortion can be one of the most traumatic events in a person's life. Research indicates that more than 40 percent of women of child-bearing age have experienced the pain of abortion, and as many as 70 percent identify as Christians.⁷² In response to this issue, Layton developed a Bible study that encourages journaling for women who have gone through abortions. She notes, "Almost everyone has faced past troubles or trauma that have left deep emotional wounds. While challenges and wounds are unavoidable, we have the power to choose how we respond to them."⁷³ Trauma can be a lonely and isolating experience, but writing can bring individuals back into the fold of their faith community. By putting pen to paper, those who have suffered can find a path towards healing and connection. Theologically, art therapy offers a means for individuals to connect with God's creativity and respond to God's actions in a poetic manner.

⁷¹ Reiter, *Writing Away the Demons*, 127, quoted in Adams and Thompson, *Expressive Writing Foundations of Practice*, 74.

⁷² Pat Layton, *Surrendering the Secret: Healing the Heartbreak of Abortion* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 2008), 5.

⁷³ Layton, *Surrendering the Secret*, 12.

Conclusion

Offering a space for individuals to express themselves based on their faith and who they are in Christ is crucial for faith communities that want to witness the Divine lived out in every individual. Traumatic events affect children and adults differently, and art therapy can be helpful for processing and understanding one's emotions in a creative way. Art therapy provides an opportunity to explore language and cultivate the imaginative side of oneself. Clergy and laity can develop small groups where art therapy is tool to heal and recover. As author Susan Zimmerman beautifully states: "The soul knows what it needs to heal. Through writing, it will lead you where you need to go."⁷⁴ Through the art of poetry, one finds a journey toward recovery.

Following a traumatic experience, those who bear the image of God can rediscover their identity through the practice of written exercises. The artistic process enables a path of self-exploration that is grounded in biblical foundations, much like how God's own creation process unfolds. Trauma can impede personal growth, hinder progress within a faith community, and obstruct the attainment of Christ-like attributes. Painful memories are often seared into the mind, replaying themselves over and over. However, art therapy can aid in the reconstruction of these memories by reshaping one's narrative.

The practice of art therapy connects individuals with the creation story of Genesis, where the process of creation is characterized by an intricate interdependence of all elements of the earth. As a result, this fosters a cooperative relationship between humans and nature that requires nurturing and preservation. The facilitator of a creative

⁷⁴ Zimmermann, *Writing to Heal the Soul*, 18.

writing group, when used as a form of therapy, plays a crucial role in the group's effectiveness. Professor and scholar Nina Brown discusses the fundamental attributes required for group leaders in her book *Creative Activities for Group Therapy*. She states, "The basic relationship attributes that are critical for group leaders are empathy, emotional presence, genuineness, positive regard, tolerance, non-judgment, psychological boundary strength, and the development of healthy adult narcissism."⁷⁵ These qualities help build trust and transparency within a small group setting, fostering an atmosphere conducive to writing and sharing, which can serve as a therapeutic channel. By integrating writing exercises into a workshop, individuals can explore their self-image and connections to God and the world in a meaningful way.

The field of art therapy has shed light on the significance of collaborative writing. William Cowper's bond with John Newton was a crucial source of encouragement for his writing and well-being. The enduring legacy of their work continues to inspire and uplift Christians even today, as history has shown. William Cowper utilized creative writing to deepen his connection with God and communicate the gospel message. This led to an increased sense of assurance and enhanced mental well-being. It is worth reemphasizing that while creative writing can serve as a valuable resource for mental health, it should never be viewed as a replacement for expert mental healthcare. William Cowper sought professional assistance to alleviate his mental distress. Through this journey, he found that creative writing was a valuable tool for his overall happiness, allowing him to articulate his emotions. Theoretical research indicates that art therapy can enhance one's

⁷⁵ Nina Brown, *Creative Activities for Group Therapy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 44-45.

well-being by promoting positive emotions, fostering better relationships, providing opportunities for service, and illuminating purpose and meaning.

The art of poetry can be an effective aid in theological discourse, particularly when grasping God's nature and traits. Words can symbolize the concrete and abstract worlds we inhabit, constructing and illuminating the importance of our existence, experiences, and mission. Poetry serves as a tool for expressing the wonder and awe of God, as well as the spiritual journey. Through theopoetics, one is urged to approach their faith and connection with Jesus in a creative manner, and poetry provides the ideal means of conveying such imaginative musings into language.

Art therapy is a therapeutic approach that utilizes creative techniques to address emotional challenges and promote general well-being. For individuals living in rural areas who are struggling and seeking alternative forms of support, engaging in creative writing exercises, and developing a deeper appreciation for the arts can be especially beneficial. In West Virginia, there is a growing need for resources to aid in the healing process. Organic recovery programs offered by faith communities can serve as a valuable source of assistance. In the next chapter, the research study that focused on using a seven-week creative writing workshop to help church members articulate past or present trauma was developed and implemented at Reedsville UMC. The process, combined with writing activities and a supportive small group environment, proved to be beneficial for many of the participants.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

To address the needs of the members of Reedsville United Methodist Church and the broader Preston County community, a creative writing workshop was established to help individuals articulate past and present trauma. The lack of cultural arts in the area disadvantages the community. This workshop offered adults a safe and imaginative space to process and express their feelings.

Creative writing serves as an effective way to communicate both past and present personal and family trauma. Writing helps explore areas of vulnerability, moments of temptation, and strategies to overcome and endure life's challenges. This project demonstrated that writing together in a group setting can be a therapeutic tool. Engaging in poetry with others fosters an atmosphere of vulnerability, accountability, and healing. Inspired by my spiritual journey and current context, I developed structured creative writing sessions within a church setting aimed at helping adults who are dealing with unspoken trauma feel safe to express themselves. Poetry can facilitate recovery.

This research study was conducted during an hour-and-a-half to two hours of a face-to-face, seven-week creative writing workshop. As part of the workshop, I discussed my Biblical Foundations for the project from Genesis 1: 26–28. The Genesis scripture served as a reminder that every individual is of immeasurable worth as they are made in the image of God. The impact of personal and family trauma can be profound, shaping

the way individuals view themselves. Seeking divine guidance is not just necessary, but it is a reassuring and guiding force in understanding one's identity, which can shift one's perspective on how one views oneself and one's relationship with God. Trauma can cause a person to lose their sense of identity. However, the Genesis text can help fulfill this search for identity. This biblical text was foundational for conducting a creative writing workshop in that the truth of identity empowers participants to allow their divine light within to shine and speak their truth.

The biblical passage emphasized the importance of discovering and fulfilling one's purpose as an image bearer of God. Despite personal pain, participants learned how they can still contribute to God's ongoing creation by creating collaboratively. The story of Adam and Eve highlights the value of collaboration, productivity, and caring for the earth. Each member of Christ's body has a unique role that aids in bearing fruit. Ultimately, the Genesis passage reminded participants of their need to uncover their purpose and use the act of creating to care for themselves as well as others.

In the Historical Foundations paper, examining the life of William Cowper was a crucial aspect of this project and research study. Cowper's experiences highlight the importance of childhood and adolescent development, particularly in relation to the impact of untreated trauma. After losing his mother at a youthful age, he faced neglect from his father and did not receive the support needed to cope with his grief and emotional pain. Research has identified several signs of one struggling with grief and loss, including depression, fear, and withdrawal.¹ Many individuals within the church

¹ John Sommers-Flanagan, "The Development and Evolution of Person-Centered Expressive Art Therapy: A Conversation with Natalie Rogers," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 85, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 120–25, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2007.tb00454.x>.

exhibit these behaviors but often attempt to conceal them. The scarcity of adequate mental health facilities in rural America contributes to a rise in untreated emotional health issues among both adults and young people.² The church should consistently support its members in seeking professional mental health care. The research indicates that when children and adolescents do not process trauma effectively, it can result in significant issues later in adulthood.

A key aspect of William Cowper's life, relevant to this research project, is how collaborative writing fosters relationships and creativity. The friendship between Cowper and Newton built trust, allowing them to openly discuss and critique each other's work. Their relationship highlights the importance of collaborative writing for personal well-being and its benefits to the faith community. This research project established a writing community that enhanced fellowship and encouraged creative collaboration.

Prayer was incorporated throughout the creative writing sessions. Prayer was also a significant force in Cowper's life. He consistently prayed for his friends, and they reciprocated, which led to meaningful changes in their lives.³ Prayer created an atmosphere within the seven-week workshop that allowed the Holy Spirit to work through the act of creative writing. As a result of the Spirit being present, participants could express their inner struggles through written prayers, letters, poems which allowed participants to unlock their potential and invite spiritual healing.

² Dawn A. Morales, et al., "A Call to Action to Address Rural Mental Health Disparities," *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science* 4, no. 5 (May 2020): 463-467. 2

³ Thomas Wright, *The Life of William Cowper* (Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 2005), 147.

This research project explored collaborative creative writing sessions that helped individuals cope with their struggles and foster a healthier community. During this seven-week creative writing workshop, Reedsville UMC offered a safe environment for members to express their emotions and stress constructively. Writing proved to be a powerful tool for connecting with inner selves and spirituality, ultimately promoting individual well-being.

I used my Theological Foundations research to introduce the concept of theopoetics, encouraging creativity and imagination in connecting with God. The workshop taught church members that theopoetics is a hermeneutical approach that employs poetry and art to understand the Divine. This method proved valuable for pastoral care and spiritual formation within the workshop. Creative writing sessions provided a means for individuals, especially those with family trauma, to connect with God. The theology of theopoetics allowed participants to reflect on and experience their faith more deeply through letter writing and journaling, transforming their personal stories.

Furthermore, laity learned to integrate theopoetics into liturgical practices like song and poetry, helping them bear witness to Jesus's presence and fostering a deeper connection with God. This approach created a safe space for individuals to share their pain and aspirations, strengthening faith and community relationships. Creative writing helped members explore their faith during challenging times, deepening their engagement with their beliefs.

Participants learned about the connection between theopoetics and the church's mission. A theopoetic approach enables individuals to collaborate across different beliefs

while staying grounded in their relationship with God. Engaging in social justice through this lens allows the church to actively contribute to the revelation of God's Kingdom. This approach unlocks the creative potential of each individual, made in God's image, and helps foster a more inclusive society aligned with social justice principles.

A creative writing workshop allowed individuals to express their trauma and explore their roles in the church's mission through theopoetics. This research emphasizes the need for the church to provide a safe space for creative expression relating to faith and identity in Christ. The poetry exercises encouraged participants to articulate their experiences, fostering theological discourse and documenting their spiritual journeys while experiencing the goodness of God. Theopoetics, with its focus on creative engagement with Jesus, was effectively expressed through the written word.

For my interdisciplinary foundation, art therapy connected all the other foundations for my research project. Writing exercises within the workshop helped individuals explore their self-image and their connections to the world and God. Drawing inspiration from the bonds between writers like William Cowper and John Newton, art therapy fostered collaboration and encouraged participants to inspire one another. While writing is a valuable tool for happiness, it is not a substitute for mental healthcare. Nonetheless, art therapy enhanced well-being by nurturing positive emotions, relationships, and meaning through creative workshops.

Art therapy allowed me to introduce creative techniques as a way of improving emotional well-being in the lives of the participants. In rural areas, creative writing and appreciation for the arts have proven beneficial for those in need of support. In West Virginia, faith communities implementing organic recovery programs can enhance

community connections through the arts by fostering self-reflection and imagination in writing groups. This research project at Reedsville UMC highlighted the need for cultural arts exposure as a way for individuals to process feelings of brokenness. Participants in the arts expression workshop gained confidence in sharing their trauma experiences and developed deeper relationships with each other.

Methodology

I employed various approaches to gather data for my research project. I conducted a seven-week workshop focused on cultural arts expression. I believe participants can greatly benefit from collaborative creative writing groups. Creating a safe and supportive environment for individuals to express their trauma and begin healing was essential for collecting data in a creative writing workshop setting. In my experience, writing groups do provide a space for individuals to openly reflect and express unhealed trauma. The creative writing workshop consisted of adult members of Reedsville UMC. A sense of unity can be created within a small group centered around collaborative writing.

However, one risk of collecting data from a group gathering is that some participants may feel uncomfortable and hesitant to share. Therefore, the facilitator must cultivate an atmosphere of humility, vulnerability, and trust. Strong friendships can flourish in small group settings, and within a creative writing workshop, an authentic bond encourages individuals to use their gifts to inspire and bring hope to others through their writing.

The decision to conduct a seven-week creative writing workshop was driven by the desire to create a secure environment where real relationships could be formed. This

environment was crucial for the participants to feel comfortable expressing their deepest thoughts and struggles through creative language and poetry. Research has consistently shown that the creative writing process can be highly beneficial for all involved. The success or failure of the group dynamics in creating an environment of vulnerability and openness to share and write was a key aspect of my data collection.

Before and after the creative writing workshop, participants completed pre-project and post-project questionnaires, which benefited my research data. The questions in these questionnaires aimed to evaluate my hypothesis. Specifically, they addressed whether participants were experiencing past or current trauma and whether they felt comfortable expressing their feelings.

The main goal of this research project was to assist individuals who are hesitant to share their trauma experiences and have concealed their pain and encourage them to begin sharing through creative writing. The responses to the pre-questionnaires and post-questionnaires helped determine whether a collaborative writing group provided a safe space for church members to express their trauma as a means of healing.

Comparing the participants' pre-questionnaires and post-questionnaires responses significantly contributed data to my research. One of the questions included in both the pre and post-questionnaires was: "How important is it to offer the arts at Reedsville United Methodist Church?" This question was essential for evaluating my hypothesis, which suggests that rural communities often lack exposure to the cultural arts, which serve as a means for individuals to process and express trauma. Without access to artistic expression, an inherent gift bestowed upon humanity, the church has limited opportunity to engage creatively and authentically.

Another methodology I used to gather data was journaling. Each participant was provided with a journal and encouraged to write for fifteen minutes each day at home. No specific topic was assigned; participants were simply asked to write in their journals daily. Journaling has long been recognized as a tool for emotional expression. It allows individuals to explore their thoughts, comprehend their purpose, and understand how their faith intersects with the challenges of daily life. Furthermore, journaling enables participants to go beyond surface-level language and stereotypes related to their everyday routines. The journals were not collected; however, I gathered data through the weekly discussions based on the participants' verbal reflections on their journaling experiences.

Gathering data on each participant's approach to journaling and its effects on their thought processes provided valuable insights into the benefits of this project. The discussions around journal writing aimed to determine whether daily journaling helps individuals express themselves more effectively. Even if participants faced daily challenges in writing, this struggle contributed to my data collection. The discussions revealed insights into the participants' daily writing challenges, including obstacles to expressing their emotions.

Writing assignments and group discussions played a crucial role in data collection to evaluate my hypothesis. Creative writing exercises enabled participants to express their feelings and sense of brokenness. These exercises included reading and writing letters, exploring specific topics, and analyzing poetry by renowned poets. Numerous case studies illustrate the effectiveness of art therapy in helping individuals process their emotions and reflect on their faith during times of crisis and trauma.

Participants were given weekly writing assignments. Although the first two assignments, which involved letter writing, were not collected, conversations were recorded to assess the impact of these writing exercises on the participants. Writing allows individuals to articulate their emotions and feelings in a manner that can provide both release and clarity, particularly for those struggling to express unhealed trauma. The writing exercises offered participants a way to put words to feelings and thoughts that might be easier to write than to say aloud. My hope was that writing would give participants a sense of control over their situations and serve as a container for a wide range of emotions.

Discussions on foundational research were recorded to collect valuable data. For instance, my goal in teaching about the biblical foundation was to help participants understand that they are created in God's image. Trauma victims often lose their sense of identity, which can hinder their self-discovery, growth within a faith community, and conformity to the image of Christ. When church members can process and express their identity as image bearers, they will develop a deeper understanding of their purpose and meaning.

Finally, my approach to data collecting involved conducting personal interviews with each participant. I aimed to gather information about their experiences from the seven-week creative writing workshop. During the interviews, I recorded the conversations and encouraged each participant to speak openly. This allowed me to understand whether they gained confidence in sharing their past or present trauma through artistic expression.

Implementation

Upon receiving approval from the IRB, I moved forward in the implementation of my project in the area of recruitment. First, I included a bulletin insert for the congregation members at Reedsville UMC. There was immediate interest from some members in becoming potential participants. Those who were interested, I had conversations with to allow them to ask questions and gain a deeper understanding of the research study and process. I also conducted three interest meetings on July 7, August 4 and September 1 of 2024, following worship services to provide a personal explanation of my final project and research to potential participants. On August 14, 2024, I finalized the participant list and obtained documentation and signatures on all consent forms.

I began the first session of the creative writing workshop on September 9, 2024, with nine members from Reedsville UMC taking part in the research study. A licensed counselor was present during each session to address any potential triggering of negative emotions or past traumas.

I opened the session with a prayer. Following the prayer, I spent the first twenty minutes of the workshop explaining the start of the study, the importance of the project, and how it came to be. I shared my personal journey and my experiences with creative writing, emphasizing how writing became an essential pathway for expression in my life. By sharing my own story, I aimed to foster an atmosphere of vulnerability. To ensure the effectiveness of the creative writing group process, it was crucial to establish trust among the participants. Therefore, I demonstrated my trust in them by becoming vulnerable and sharing my story.

I distributed journals to each participant and explained the purpose of journal writing. I also introduced a writing exercise, encouraging everyone to journal for fifteen minutes each day at home. I clarified that there was no specific topic to write about; participants were simply asked to write in their journals daily, and their journals would not be collected. Next, I handed out a pre-project questionnaire and allowed the participants to complete it in about ten minutes.

Before closing in prayer, I explained the writing exercise for week two, which was to write a letter to one's younger self. This writing exercise introduced the art of writing to express one's thoughts and emotions. In writing a letter to one's younger self, it allows participants the opportunity to reflect on themselves, gain insight, and ignite their creativity by engaging in this writing exercise. I also let the participants know that this writing exercise would not be collected, only discussed the following week. I did not want to collect their writing assignments in the beginning as a way of allowing the participants to feel that they could freely express themselves with no judgement.

The second session of the creative writing workshop took place on September 16, 2024. After opening with prayer, I asked each participant to share and reflect on their journal exercise of writing for fifteen minutes each day. I recorded each participant's response to their experience and asked if there were any challenges to journaling every day.

Next, we discussed the writing exercise of writing a letter to one's younger self. I explained how our past emotions and experiences can influence our present thoughts and feelings. Surprisingly, each participant wanted to read their letters aloud. I recorded discussion and the responses to the participants engagement of listening to each other

letters. This process took longer than I had predicted. I had planned for twenty minutes to allow for reflection on the letter writing exercise, however, it took about forty minutes for all the participants to share and reflect.

I spent the last part of the session discussing the Biblical Foundations of my project. I reviewed the creation story in Genesis 1 and talked about how humanity was created in the image of God. Since we spent a lot of time discussing and reflecting on the first writing assignment, I decided not to have participants write in their journals about what it means to be created in the image of God. Instead, I introduced the writing exercise for week three, which was to write a letter or prayer to God. This creative writing exercise allows participants who have experienced painful events and have lost their sense of purpose and identity to connect uniquely with the Creator. I also informed the group that I would not be collecting this assignment. I reminded them to continue writing in their journals for fifteen minutes each day. I closed the session with a prayer.

The third session of the creative writing workshop took place on September 23, 2024. After opening with prayer, I asked each participant to share and reflect on their journal exercise of writing for fifteen minutes each day. I recorded each participant's response to their experience and asked if there were any challenges to journaling every day.

Next, we discussed the writing exercise assignment of writing a letter or prayer to God. I asked the group what insights or reflections this writing exercise created. Once again, each of the participants chose to share their letters and I recorded the group's responses and insights from this writing assignment. After experiencing trauma, individuals need to be reminded that they are created in God's likeness. Participants were

given the space to reclaim their identity through this letter writing exercise. Again, this part in the workshop took longer than I had expected, but I freely gave the time to each participant to share their letters and their reflections on the process. I had planned for twenty minutes to allow for reflection on the letter writing exercise, however, it took about fifty minutes for each participant to share and reflect. This creative process of art and discussion opens a pathway for participants to engage in self-discovery and realization rooted in Biblical Foundations.

I spent the last part of the session teaching on the Historical Foundations of my project. Participants were introduced to the life and work of William Cowper. William Cowper used creative writing to connect with God and spread the gospel, as well as to articulate on traumatic events in his life. I shared some poetry written by Cowper that illustrated his use of creative writing to share his faith, pain, and relationship with God. I also shared a poem written by a contemporary poet, Marie Howe, titled "The Good Thief." The background of this poem describes Eve's conversation after eating the apple. The poem explores the moment when one makes a choice and the implications of our choices in life.⁴ I discussed how writing can allow one to express emotions and examine our past and present choices.

Due to time constraints, I was unable to introduce the participants to the writing exercise focused on reflecting on a time when they felt God's presence guiding them. Instead, I presented the writing assignment for week four, which involved writing about a stressful, traumatic, or emotional experience. I explained that writing about such experiences provides a safe space for participants to process past or present trauma,

⁴ Marie Howe, *The Good Thief* (New York: NY: Persea Books, 1988), 3.

offering them insight, reflection, and a new perspective on the event. This act of writing helps them articulate their emotions and feelings, allowing for a sense of release and clarity, especially for those who struggle to express unhealed trauma. I also informed the group that I would not be collecting this assignment. I reminded them to continue writing in their journals for fifteen minutes each day. I closed the session with a prayer.

The fourth session of the creative writing workshop took place on September 30, 2024. After opening with prayer, I asked each participant to share and reflect on their journal exercise of writing for fifteen minutes each day. I recorded each participants response to their experience and asked if there were any challenges to journaling every day.

Next, we discussed the writing exercise assignment, which involved reflecting on a stressful, traumatic, or emotional experience. As I had expected, this sharing and reflection took longer than anticipated. I had scheduled twenty minutes for this activity, but as each participant openly shared their reflections, it extended to almost an hour and a half. I made a point to give each participant the time and space they needed to share what they had written.

I shared with the participants my Theological Foundations. In this session, I introduced the theology of theopoetics. Participants learned how theopoetics incorporates creative writing with religious reflection. Participants explored how the theology of theopoetics appreciates the act of using art to express faith experiences and religious thinking. To illustrate this process, I distributed the poem "Happiness" by Jane Kenyon. The background of this poem describes how one can find joy in life, even during pain and

suffering.⁵ I explained to the participants how Jane Kenyon authored this poem while she was suffering from leukemia.

Before closing in prayer, I introduced the writing exercise for week five, which involved writing about any theological theme from the bible. I asked participants to give their creative piece a title and informed them that I would be collecting their writings. I also encouraged them to continue writing in their journals for fifteen minutes each day.

The fifth session of the creative writing workshop took place on October 7, 2024. After opening with prayer, I asked each participant to share and reflect on their journal exercise of writing for fifteen minutes each day. I recorded each participants response to their experience and asked if there were any challenges to journaling every day.

Next, we discussed the writing exercise assignment, which involved writing about a theological theme from the Bible. Once again, this time of sharing lasted longer than the scheduled twenty minutes that I had originally allotted. Each participant shared their titled creative writing piece on a theological theme which lasted about an hour. I recorded each participant's response on how the experience of writing about a theological theme from the bible impacted them, as well as what insights or reflections they gained from writing about such a theme.

Next, I introduced my Interdisciplinary Foundation for my project which is art therapy. During this time, I shared how artistic methods can help participants articulate their experience of trauma. I explained how creative writing exercises can help one to explore self-expression. Again, due to the length of time I did not have a chance to share a variety of poetry from a diverse group of poets, as I had planned to illustrate how one

⁵ Jane Kenyon, *Otherwise* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1996), 3.

can write about life's experiences as a means of art therapy. Instead, I shared with them one poem titled "The Gift" from Li-Young Lee's book of poetry, *Rose*. The background of this poem describes the poet fondly remembering the gift of his father's love and tenderness, which was sparked when the poet removed a splinter from his wife's hand, returning memories from his childhood when his father removed a splinter from his hand.⁶ Participants who suffer from grief can significantly benefit from writing about their loved ones and remembering good memories about them. However, if participants have had painful childhoods, this poem offers an illustration of how one can still write about memories and be given permission to rewrite memories.

During this session, I did not have enough time for participants to write about surrendering something that is out of their control to God as I had also planned. This writing exercise as a means of art therapy would have allowed individuals to express emotions, confront fears, and strengthen their relationship with God. Instead, I introduced them to the at-home writing exercise for week six which was to write about a person or an event that had significantly impacted the participant's life. I also informed them that I would be collecting this writing exercise. I encouraged them to continue writing in their journals for fifteen minutes each day and closed in prayer.

The sixth session of the creative writing workshop took place on October 14, 2024. After opening with prayer, I asked each participant to share and reflect on their journal exercise of writing for fifteen minutes each day. I recorded each participants response to their experience and asked if there were any challenges to journaling every day. We then discussed the writing exercise assignment, which required participants to

⁶ Li-Young Lee, *Rose* (Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 1986), 15.

write about a person or event that has significantly impacted their lives. As is often the case, this sharing time exceeded the originally planned twenty minutes, lasting over an hour. Participants each shared their creative writing pieces and received constructive feedback and reflection from the group. We discussed the experience of reading their creative work out loud in a group setting and the benefits of collaborative writing to articulate unspoken trauma. I recorded each participant's response regarding how the experience of writing about a significant person or event affected them, as well as the insights or reflections they gained from exploring this theme.

During this session, I covered the fundamentals of poetry writing and introduced the writing exercise known as The Blackout Poem, which enhances creative writing skills. This exercise involves working from a photocopied page of a bible, newspaper, or magazine, where participants underline important words or use a marker to blackout any words they wish to omit. The words that remain will form a poem. I also shared a poem I wrote about my mother. Due to time constraints, participants were unable to draft a poem in person as I had originally planned. Instead, they were encouraged to write a poem at home on any subject they wished, which I would be collecting during the last session. I discussed the possibility of having a poetry reading during our last session; however, not all participants felt comfortable sharing their writings outside of the group. Before closing in prayer, I encouraged everyone to continue writing in their journals for fifteen minutes each day.

The seventh and final session of the creative writing workshop took place on October 21, 2024. After opening with prayer, I asked each participant to share and reflect on their journal writing for fifteen minutes each day. I recorded each participants

response to their experience and asked if there were any challenges to journaling every day. Each participant had the opportunity to share their poem or creative writing they created and titled. This time of collaborative sharing and reflection took close to an hour.

I also individually interviewed each participant on their experiences during the seven-week creative writing workshop. Additionally, a post-project questionnaire was distributed to gather valuable feedback. I closed our last session in prayer.

Summary of Learning

The analysis summarizes the learning gathered from the participants and research data. Nine participants took part in this study, consisting of six females and three males. Their ages ranged from thirty-six to sixty-eight years.

The pre-project questionnaires provided valuable insights into the potential growth and healing that could occur during the seven-week creative writing workshop. The results indicated that out of the nine participants, the majority rated their difficulty in expressing their deepest thoughts and feelings as a 5 on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 represents minimal difficulty and 10 represents maximum difficulty. One participant rated their difficulty at 10, another at 7, and another at 3.

Interestingly, one participant who rated themselves as a 5 explained that they “often feel numb, like my emotions are so buried that I can’t find the words to describe them.” Other participants who also rated themselves as 5 stated that their ability to express thoughts or emotions depended on the comfort level with the audience. This finding highlighted the essential role of creating a space of trust within the workshop.

When asked about their ability to articulate emotions when feeling upset, approximately 50% of participants rated themselves at a level 5, indicating ease in expression, while the other 50% reported difficulty in expressing their emotions during such times. Many participants mentioned that they tend to keep quiet or stay busy to avoid confronting their feelings. One individual noted that they resort to using their phone and "close down" emotionally. From their responses, I realized that there would be opportunities for breakthroughs as participants engage in a creative process during the workshops.

Another question posed was: How comfortable are you expressing your beliefs? The pre-questionnaires revealed that seven out of nine [77%] of the participants lacked confidence in voicing their beliefs, while two out of nine [23%] said it depended on their comfort level with the people they were with. A few participants noted that it was easier to share their beliefs with other Christians, but the majority emphasized that trust was a significant factor in being able to speak their truth.

One of the final questions on the pre-questionnaire inquired whether the participants had used creative writing or journaling as coping strategies to express and process trauma. The responses to this question were enlightening. Out of the nine participants, only three reported having used these strategies, with one of them mentioning that they had only journaled occasionally. The remaining six participants relied on other coping methods, such as prayer, studying scripture, and professional counseling. This information was both helpful and exciting in regard to my hypothesis, as I was prepared to introduce the participants to the benefits of creative writing during the seven-week workshop.

As outlined in the implementation section, each participant received a journal on the first day of the workshop and was instructed to write for fifteen minutes every day. The following week, and at the beginning of each subsequent workshop, I asked each participant to share their experiences and any challenges they faced with daily journaling.

Initially, some participants found journaling difficult, as finding the time proved to be a challenge. Morning routines—getting ready for work, preparing children for school, and handling the busyness of the morning—often distracted them.

It took several participants a few days to establish a rhythm for writing. However, once they found a consistent time to write, whether in the morning or evening, they discovered that the words flowed more easily, leading to a sense of peace and a calming of their minds. One participant, referred to as participant #3, mentioned, “After finding a schedule to write every day, my thoughts began to flow, and I was able to clear out the junk. Writing allowed me to reflect on things I hadn’t thought about in a while.” By creating a dedicated space for writing, participant #3 was able to examine their past and present, recognizing emotions and thoughts they had previously ignored.

Another participant expressed the joy and peace that writing brought to them: “I realized I love to write. I struggled during the first couple of days to find the time, but after I write, I feel more centered.” After the initial challenge of finding time, many participants noted that journaling became a therapeutic experience, allowing them to cleanse their minds and reflect on their thoughts and actions.

As the weeks progressed, seven out of the nine participants reported having no significant challenges with journaling for fifteen minutes every day. One participant noted that they felt less calm on days when they missed an entry, while another

mentioned that they often wrote for longer than fifteen minutes and lost track of time while journaling. Participant #4, who indicated that they had no prior journaling experience, shared their thoughts on the process: “Journaling allows me to see a whole new perspective. It feels good to get things off my chest so that I can go to bed without worrying. When I write, I feel at ease, and the next morning, I am calmer.”

Another participant, referred to as participant #7, engaged in the daily journaling exercise about 30% of the time during the seven-week creative writing workshop. Participant #7 expressed, “I struggled to write for fifteen minutes every day because I am not good at discussing my emotions.” However, on the days that participant #7 did journal in the evening, the participant stated, “I did feel better because I wrote down the things that annoyed me that day and the foolishness I see in others.” This honest reflection from participant #7 indicates that journaling served as a valuable outlet for expressing stress and frustrations experienced throughout the day.

One participant, referred to as #8, faced the most significant challenges with daily journaling and ultimately chose not to participate in the exercise at all. Participant #8 explained that work and family responsibilities made daily journaling difficult. Participant #8 stated, “My biggest challenge in not journaling is that when I come home from work, I switch off and want to stop thinking about anything. My stress disappears when I’m home, and I turn my brain off.” Participant #8 admitted that while journaling could be beneficial, spending time with family was top priority.

The insights gained from this writing exercise confirmed my hypothesis that journaling was beneficial for most participants in expressing their emotions, feelings, and thoughts. Participants reported experiencing a sense of calmness and clarity, which varied

depending on when they wrote. This practice helped them stay more focused throughout the day or achieve a better night's sleep. However, the main challenge to journaling daily was finding the time to write.

The insights I gained during week two of the creative writing workshop reinforced my belief in the importance of structured writing sessions. Such sessions create a safe space for trust and vulnerability, which are crucial for adults dealing with unspoken trauma to feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

For the first writing exercise, participants were asked to write a letter to our younger selves. Participants had the option to read their letters aloud if they felt comfortable doing so. To encourage openness, I chose to read my letter first. My aim was to set an atmosphere of transparency and emotional connection.

Amazingly, each participant was willing to share their own letter to their younger selves after I read mine. Participant #6 volunteered to read the letter and shared that writing to one's younger self was "tricky at first." Participant #6 mentioned feeling uncertain about what needed to be said but realized as they wrote that reassurance was important. In the letter, participant #6 affirmed that they were smart, beautiful, and, as she stated, "a blessing and not a curse." After reading, I noticed that a heaviness seemed to lift from participant #6.

After participant #1 read their letter, the participant shared that this process brought back memories from childhood and highlighted the strength they developed while taking care of their family after their father's passing at an early age. Participant #1 mentioned that they experienced a breakthrough during the letter-writing process. Additionally, participant #1 noted that alongside the writing workshop, participant #1

was also working with a therapist. Through various writing exercises, participant #1 was determined to strengthen their self-perception.

Participant #7, who was among the most reserved in expressing emotions, opened up more after hearing from others. In the letter written by participant #7, it became clear that participant #7 did not receive much affirmation as a child, particularly from the participant's mother. However, through the process of writing a letter to one's younger self, participant #7 was able to reflect on the past and recognize the goodness within themselves as a child. After reading the letter, participant #7 remarked, "I could have written a novel to my younger self. There was goodness in me, even to this day." The other participants in the group began to affirm the goodness they each saw in participant #7. The encouragement and support offered by the group members reinforced the power of words and highlighted the emotional and spiritual benefits of being part of a small group.

As each participant read their letter, I noticed an immediate bond forming within the small group. The letters, which were written to their younger selves, revealed that one participant was still grieving over a broken marriage, another carried shame from being abandoned by a father, one had self-esteem issues stemming from feelings of inadequacy as a child, and another participant congratulated their younger self for not becoming like their mother. It was clear that these individuals had carried pain, hurt, and shame from childhood trauma. In the midst of the pain, there was a sense of encouragement, affirmation, and understanding, especially for those who openly shared how empty and hurt their younger selves had felt in the past.

This letter-writing exercise served as a good introduction to the Biblical Foundation teachings on Genesis, emphasizing that every person is created in the image of God and is therefore worthy of the utmost respect, honor, and dignity. The reteaching of Genesis 1:26–28 highlights the importance of identity, purpose, and being a new creation in Christ. After the Biblical Foundations teaching and its connection to my project, participant #3 shared this insight: “Being made in God’s image means I’m good; I can love myself.” Participant #3 had previously mentioned in the letter-writing exercise that growing up without an earthly father had unknowingly left a mark on them, affecting their self-esteem issues.

Participant #5 shared an important realization about being created in the image of God: “I was created as I was supposed to be, and I am just as good as my other family members.” In the letter-writing exercise, Participant #5 expressed feelings from childhood about being the youngest and feeling inadequate. All the participants’ responses to connecting Genesis 1:26–28 with their own identities and purposes in the world support my hypothesis that trauma can often lead to a loss of identity and purpose but in Christ, our purpose and identity is restored.

During week three of the creative writing workshop, I gained valuable insights that supported my hypothesis about the need to articulate past and present trauma in my context. A significant breakthrough occurred for many participants during an exercise where they wrote letters to God. Each participant felt safe enough to share their letters aloud with the group.

This process of addressing God through letter writing allowed participant #1 to express the brokenness the participant felt from the loss of a marriage. Participant #1

shared the deep mourning over the divorce, stating, "One can no longer pretend when they are writing to God." Through this writing, participant #1 was able to articulate unspoken grief. The act of writing the letter gave the participant a voice to confront the pain of betrayal, allowing the participant to stop pretending everything was fine.

After reading a letter addressed to God, participant #4 shared how the writing exercise began by tearing up several letters before starting to write. Initially, participant #4 struggled with what to say to God. Throughout the letter-writing process, it became evident that participant #4 was harboring anger from the past and had difficulty accepting God's plan. The letter contained numerous questions, including a list of "Whys?" It concluded with a commitment to God, expressing a dedication to live and trust, even without having answers to those questions.

Participant #8 found it challenging to write a letter to God and instead opted to write a prayer. In this prayer, the participant created a list of things the participant was grateful for along with concerns for the church. Writing prayers serves as a spiritual connection to God and allows for the expression of thoughts that might be difficult to articulate out loud. Through this process, participant #8 discovered that writing out prayers was more helpful than speaking them.

Participant #5 wrote a letter to God, which helped the participant to express their faith and convey the sadness they felt about a strained relationship with their child. This act of writing allowed the participant to share a prayer concern with the group that the participant was previously unable to express within the faith community. After reading the letter to God, the group prayed for the relationship between the participant and their son.

In each of these letters to God, a deep, unhealed wound was revealed. The participants felt safe and vulnerable, allowing them to share their deepest needs not only with God but also with one another. I was grateful for the Spirit moving among the group, which was evident in the uplifting and caring words exchanged. The spiritual aspect of writing enables individuals to express their true needs, creating a space where healing can occur.

The historical research on William Cowper's life highlights the significance of collaborative writing and prayer, which were evident in the creative writing workshop. Cowper wrote poems that reflected his past traumas and his faith in God. His relationship with John Newton played a crucial role in nurturing his writing abilities and providing him with the encouragement to express himself. In the group setting, I observed that through the act of writing and being held accountable, each participant began to articulate their own past or present traumas.

In week four, the writing experience became the most intense as the participants wrote about a traumatic or stressful event. This exercise and the insights gained from it supported my hypothesis that valuing the act of putting words to feelings and thoughts is often easier when written than when spoken. During this session, I did not collect each participant's written work, but I recorded the titles of their pieces. I will share how writing allowed participants to express some deep traumatic events that many of them had never shared before. This information will be presented as data in my research.

Participant #1 titled the poem presented to the group as "The Day You Left Me." In this piece, the participant explored the theme of betrayal, focusing on a husband leaving his wife. The poem featured a rhyme scheme and was filled with deep emotion.

This powerful writing moved another group member to share their feelings of loss from a past relationship. Participant #1's poem served as an excellent example of how poetry can resonate with readers, evoking memories, and emotions.

Participant #2 wrote a piece titled "I Understand Now," in which the participant described a time when the participant experienced a sexual assault. The participant described the memory of the clothes the participant wore, even noting the shoes. The participant expressed feelings of shame and guilt for not reporting the crime. This poem resonated with another participant, who was able to reflect on and process their own feelings from a similar incident while listening to Participant #2's words.

Participant #3 composed a poem titled "Broken," which reflects on the last time the participant saw their father before he passed away. The participant became emotional while reading the poem, requiring tissues throughout the entire session, during which a licensed counselor was also present. The poem concluded with the participant's realization that their father was the one who was truly broken.

Participant #4 titled the poem presented to the group as "Untitled" and wrote about growing up in poverty while witnessing their father's constant physical abuse toward the participant and their mother. The participant explained that their older brother was a constant protector throughout the participant's life. The participant was able to share through the writing exercise past wounds that were not yet healed.

Participant #5 composed a written piece titled "Motherhood" and wrote about a mother's estrangement from a child. This story once again sparked emotions and encouraged other participants to share similar life experiences. The participant used this

writing exercise as a form of prayer to express the heartache the participant carried and was unable to share with the faith community.

Participant #6 titled the poem presented to the group as “How Do You Know?” In this piece, the participant intertwined past and present traumatic experiences. Throughout the poem, the participant posed several questions related to trauma, such as: How do you know when to hide? How do you know when to speak? How do you know when to be brave? How do you know that it’s not your fault? These questions didn’t necessarily require answers; the participant expressed the feeling of empowerment simply by asking them.

Participant #9 expressed the challenge of choosing just one traumatic event to write about. The participant ultimately decided to focus on the abuse he witnessed as a child, where his father abused his mother. The participant titled the poem “Untitled.” The poem concluded with an acknowledgment of the importance of breaking dysfunctional family cycles that the participant vowed to continue breaking.

Participants #7 and #8 did not complete the written exercise. Participant #7 felt it was too difficult to express feelings related to a traumatic experience. Participant #8 could not find the time to write anything.

During the group discussions, the participants became open about their family trauma while simultaneously gaining a sense of control over their past and present through this writing exercise. Each piece of writing acted as a container for their emotions, allowing them to reflect on those feelings and on God's role in their lives. Even participants who did not write anything were able to listen to others articulate their

traumas and feel a sense of God's presence. Through this writing exercise, participants were able to connect with God's active presence in their lives amidst their trauma.

During week five, each participant wrote about a theological theme from the Bible, connecting their reflections to my presentation on the theological foundations of the project, specifically the theology of theopoetics. I collected their writings as data to support my hypothesis. Each piece provided valuable insights into how creative writing can serve as a tool for expressing the intersection of one's faith and personal circumstances.

Participant #1 titled the poem "Darkness," using John 1:5 as a backdrop for the poem. The participant wrote this poem to express the hurt caused by the abandonment of the participant's husband that occurred years ago on the winter solstice. The following is the participant's poem:⁷

Her heart is broken but can be rebuilt
No matter how shattered the pieces seem.

The pain she feels can eventually be soothed
Even if the scars remain.

Healing comes slowly but it will come
Transforming her in ways she can never imagine.

No matter how deep she feels the darkness
And how endless the nights appear
There is always hope on the horizon.

She feels the sun with all its light and warmth
As it will rise again with new beginnings
Bringing new strength and the possibility of joy.

⁷ From this point forward, all the poetry shared in this analysis were written by the participants of this project with their informed consent.

Darkness is never forever and neither is pain
 There is always the promise of dawn and she does not fear.
 As the power of darkness will never overcome the light
 Nor will the dark devil overcome the light of the world – Jesus Christ!

During this writing process, participant #1 was able to express the pain they had carried for many years. After reading their poem, participant #1 shared with the group, “I believe that I can overcome the darkness, even after being abandoned after decades of marriage. The darkness will not last forever.” The group reaffirmed the participant’s strength and ability to overcome. Participant #2 titled the poem "Fear and Strength," reflecting on past fears and realizing current strengths as a Christian. The following is the participant’s poem:

She was but a child
 So young and dear
 Trust was uncertain
 As it would appear

Her bedroom was her safe space
 But it was without a door
 She hid there anyway
 But could always hear the roar

Her stomach would get sick
 With each passing night
 If only they could see
 What was in her sight

Quickly running to her room
 And hiding out of sight
 And always not forgetting
 To turn off the light

You should be safe now
 If you cannot be found
 Just be quiet as a mouse
 And don’t make a sound

The years have passed by now
 And now she is a teen

She still lives in her bedroom
Alone, afraid and unseen

She longs for some friendships
Or to get out of her room
But she always knows what's out there
Nothing but dark and doom

My classmates go to ball games
While she hides behind her mask
She suffers from anxiety
She's too afraid to ask

Now she is a grownup
She feels like she's insane
You would think she would be okay by now
But it's burned inside her brain.

People make her nervous
And she is so very shy
She is scared to death of people
But she can't understand why

She's desperate to try to fit in
But hiding is all she knows
She is beginning to see a pattern here
And this is what it shows

She has lived her life in fear so long
She doesn't know how to be free
Maybe with a little help
She can finally turn that key
That lock has been stuck for so long
Her youth been torn apart
But now when you see inside her soul
You see a great big heart

She's come so far from being a child
That only she would know
To this day she's still part child
But every day she grows

She knows she's had her battles
And her life began to sink
But the Lord told the devil
She's stronger than you think!

Participant #2 expressed that writing this poem and the group interaction have been more beneficial to the participant's well-being than solo therapy.

The poem titled "Peace" was written by participant #3. The poem was inspired by the beauty and wonder of God's creation.

It comes in the quiet of sunrise,
When most of the world is still asleep.
Creeping into a heart that cries,
With a calm that I can keep.

I find it when I look
At all His hand have made,
In all the wonders
That my eyes can see.
If He can make that all make sense,
What can He do in me?

Out of destruction comes rebirth,
Like a soothing calming balm.
Just as His hands move on the earth,
My heart is filled with His calm.

It does not make sense,
And I cannot explain it,
But I feel His presence,
Most in the storm.

When I am falling apart,
When I cannot go on.
I feel His peace in my heart,
And I am calm.

After reading the poem, the participant shared, "I find peace in my heart through God's creation, even when things are broken or when there is danger and devastation. But God brings me back, holding me." I realized that this poem had become an anchor for the participant amidst the storms of life. Later, the participant wrote several more poems inspired by the peace they felt through nature.

I would like to share one last poem from the week five writing assignment, authored by participant #9, who was among the more reserved individuals in the group. The poem, titled "Alpha Theory," explores a theological perspective on creation and our understanding of human beings.

Could one's mind ever figure out the beginning?
 A theory, is this what we are?
 Religion and science have placed us in between
 Faith, hypothesis, beliefs, and philosophies of theories
 Of the beginning and how it came to be.
 The lack of understanding, reason, and incertitude
 With human beings will continue to produce a stereotype
 Of the purpose of Earth and its inhabitants.
 Knowledgeably, one can decipher the cause and meaning
 Behind every created, living thing.
 The average individual will absorb any information that is hollow,
 Suitable, and bequeathed to them.
 The fabricated words are eagerly spoken,
 Divine marvel is commonly denied,
 And the facts are withheld.
 As the Earth withers, reality will soon be revealed.

Participant #9 expressed a sense of enlightenment during the writing process. The participant noted that this exercise allowed individuals to share their beliefs and views on faith and their understanding of purpose in relation to creation. This was done in a way that they might not feel confident sharing with the larger faith community.

The participants' written work and discussions from week five supported my project. The creative writing workshop aimed to provide an outlet for those who are silently suffering, allowing them to use creative writing to express their feelings and emotions. Additionally, it aimed to help participants build confidence in sharing their faith. By writing about a theological theme, the participants connected God's role in their lives and in creation.

The writing exercise for week six gave participants an opportunity to reflect on and share their thoughts about a person or event that positively impacted their lives. This assignment and the proceeding discussion explored the benefits of self-expression through creative writing, emphasizing its connection to the interdisciplinary foundational research of art therapy. I collected the participants' written work as data to support my hypothesis.

Participant #4 expressed difficulty in choosing just one person to write about who had a positive influence on them. Instead, the participant decided to select two individuals and offered a unique perspective on what it means to be positively influenced. Below is the participant's creative writing titled "Impact:"

My dad was not perfect, by any means, and we had a better relationship as an adult, but he was a terrible father to me.
How can he be a positive impact?
Because he provided me with enough dark times in my life that he influenced me not to be like him and to want more for myself than what he was allowing or wanting for me. I am the person I am today because I am completely opposite from him. Growing up I could not wait until I could leave – I did – I had some hang-ups in the beginning, probably because I had a taste of freedom but I worked hard to become someone stable enough to not require anyone to take care of me.

The other person who positively impacted my life is my brother. He always had been my protector, from my very young age—he would protect me from our dad and keep me safe. One thing he said to me a very long time ago was "You can do anything you set your mind to." I believed him. He encouraged me to go to college, get a degree and make something of myself. I don't have all the right words to describe how good he has been to me throughout my life or how he has impacted me but he has always been in my corner even when I've been wrong.

Participant #4 shared that in the past, it was exceedingly difficult for them to articulate their feelings about having an abusive father. However, they found that writing made it much easier to express their thoughts. The participant also mentioned that their sibling

suffered a fall and is now paraplegic. The participant's creative writing served as a celebration of his life and needed to be shared.

The person whom participant #6 wrote about as a positive influence was the participant's father. The following is the participant's creative written work:

My dad has always been my safety person for as long as I remember.
 He has been soft and kind and gentle with me.
 He has shown me how to be treated, but more importantly, how to treat others.
 I've learned how to respect everyone.
 We're all doing the best each day.
 I've learned to stand up for myself when I am close to my boundaries.
 He taught me that when you speak, make it meaningful.
 Mean what you say, say what you mean.
 I've learned by example and observation.
 Stay true to your beliefs, don't accept disrespect.
 Allow time for yourself.
 Do some chores.
 Enjoy what you eat.
 Go on adventure.
 Take calculated risks.
 He taught me to take care of myself and take a break, resting is doing something.
 I can't imagine who I would be without him.

After shedding tears, participant #6 shared that their father is facing cancer and needs prayer. I was aware of this prayer concern, but the participant had not previously shared it with the faith community. The writing exercise gave the participant the confidence to express their need. Additionally, the intimacy of the small group made it easier for the participant to share their prayer request.

The written piece titled "Grandma" was shared by participant #7, who has previously expressed difficulty in sharing emotions and thoughts. This creative writing provided an important outlet for emotional expression.

So I guess if I had one person who influenced me would have to be my grandma.
 I always look at her as a protector, and if my mom wouldn't let me do something that wasn't fair, I would call my grandma.
 Grandma was: Superman

Batman
 Don Mattingly
 Pete Rose
 Martin Lawerence
 Adrien Dantley
 Bernard King
 A-Rod
 Bernice Williams

Are you seeing where I'm going with this?
 She was better than Paula Dean, before she became racist.
 Once again no one could make me laugh like she could.
 For me, my hero, my greatest person I ever met was gone.
 She would tell it like she saw it.
 I miss you so much. I always will.
 My mom is still jealous of our relationship.
 Love you, grandma.

This written work provides significant insight into the struggles within participant #7.

Although this participant has attended the church for some time, I never really got to know the participant well. The written work unveils past pain and explores the strained relationship between the participant and their mother. Participant #7 has often used humor to mask true feelings, but this piece offers a glimpse into their emotions and highlights what needs healing.

At the final creative writing workshop gathering, I asked the participants to provide a written piece on a subject of their choice, which was an opportunity to explore free writing. However, I learned that eight out of the nine participants had difficulty with this assignment because they preferred having specific directions for their writing. The participants expressed that it was challenging to write without a theme. Despite their struggles, all participants submitted a written piece. Below, I have selected and shared some of the written pieces provided by the participants for my data research.

The composed creative piece titled "When Life Breaks Us" was written by participant #1:

When life breaks us, it is because we are ready to be put back together,
differently.

Every piece of us that feels shattered,
is a piece that will find a new place,
a new purpose,
and a new meaning.

Trust that the cracks are where the light shines through.
And sometimes in our brokenness,
we find our greatest wholeness.

We find the courage to rebuild,
To reimagine, to redefine what it actually means to be strong!

We are not broken,
we are just breaking through!

In the previous written works presented by participant #1, this creative writing proved to be a significant breakthrough in the participant's understanding of what it means to suffer. Previously, the participant shared their experience of a broken marriage. However, through this writing process, they were able to reflect on and redefine their perspective on suffering. Instead of viewing themselves as broken, they began to see themselves as being made whole. As a Christian, this realization of transformation serves as a powerful reminder of Christ's work within them, turning all believers into new creations.

The following poem titled "Life in the Valley" was written and shared by participant #4:

This thing called life
Often filled with so much strife
It has a way of knocking one down
Can we make it to the end to earn the crown?

Kneeling, begging, and praying
Yet these pains are never taken away
How do you stay strong?
Were we ever enough all along?

Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose
 But all along I was blind to choose
 Always knowing the difference between right and wrong
 But things always end with a fight

To start over or keep going without guidance
 Lord God, please end all this silence
 Being your child, facing too many trials
 Do you just push them away in your files?

Staying down far too long, at some point
 Please release your anoint
 Of your strong touches to conquer this thing called life.

For participant #4, the writing process involved starting over multiple times, resulting in the crumpling of at least five pieces of paper. However, after completing the final piece, participant #4 stated, "I will continue to write to express myself." In this poem, the author used life as a metaphor for prayer, illustrating how often prayers seem to go unheard. The author expressed feelings of impatience, saying, "I want things to happen now, and I think my prayers go unanswered." Upon reflecting on life through this creative writing exercise, participant #4 emphasized that, despite life's struggles, trusting in God's timing is essential.

Participant # 3 presented the poem titled "Unworthy" was presented to the group by participant #3:

I am unworthy
 Dirty and unclean
 I have fallen from grace
 Too far to been seen

I have made mistakes
 Some too shameful to speak
 How can I measure up
 When my soul is so weak?

I cannot stand to look
 Upon my face in the mirror

My eyes accuse me of my faults
Every time I come nearer

I sit huddled in the corner
Too weak to move
I know I am unworthy
There is nothing to prove

In the dark I am hiding
Hoping my shame cannot find me
It waits outside the door
Always waiting to remind me

That I am unworthy
That I am unclean
I hide my face and cry
Hoping I will remain unseen

But then a hand reaches
Into the darkest of nights
To grasp my trembling fingers
To pull me into the light

As I leave my hiding place, I hear
A soft voice full of love and light
Saying, "Come my precious child,
You are precious in my sight."

This poem beautifully expresses the understanding of one's identity in Christ and the value of being a follower, as someone who is restored and created in the image of God. The author conveyed with the group how the words flowed effortlessly through the art of poetry, emphasizing that grace is transformative and sets one free from guilt and shame.

After the group shared their creative writing with one another, I distributed post-project questionnaires. The results of these questionnaires provided strong support for my hypothesis when compared to the pre-project questionnaire results. Out of the nine participants, the majority rated their difficulty in expressing their deepest thoughts and feelings as a level 2 on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 represents minimal difficulty and 10

represents maximum difficulty. This was a significant change from the pre-project questionnaire, in which most participants rated their difficulty at level 5.

One participant noted a level 2 difficulty for writing and a level 8 for verbal expression in the pre-questionnaire. However, in the post-questionnaire, the same participant indicated that while their verbal expression remained at level 8, their writing difficulty had decreased to level 1. The participant explained, “I am generally a quiet person, and my thoughts are quiet, except when I write.”

Participant #1 reported a level 6 in difficulty expressing emotions in the pre-project questionnaire. In the post-project questionnaire, the participant indicated a level 1, stating, “This creative writing class has helped me tremendously.” It was clear that the writing process was beneficial for participant #1, who worked with a therapist throughout the seven-week creative writing workshop.

For the same question, participant #5 responded with a level 7 in the pre-project questionnaire, but in the post-questionnaire, they indicated level 2. Participant #5 explained, “Much better. I feel it helps me with my thoughts to write because when I write, I express myself better.” This result is remarkable, considering participant #5 had not participated in writing or journaling prior to the workshop.

In the pre-project questionnaire, participants were asked to rate their ability to articulate emotions when feeling upset. About 50% rated themselves a level 5, indicating that they found it easy to express their feelings. The remaining 50% reported having difficulty in expressing their emotions during these times. In the post-project questionnaire, approximately seven out of nine participants rated themselves as level 8,

reflecting an increased ease in expression. Only two out of the nine participants reported continuing to have difficulty expressing their emotions when feeling upset.

One of the questions compared between the pre-project questionnaire and the post-project questionnaire was: "How comfortable are you expressing your beliefs?" In the pre-project questionnaire, seven out of the nine participants reported feeling unconfident in voicing their beliefs, while two participants indicated that their confidence depended on their comfort level with the people around them. In contrast, the post-project questionnaire revealed that only two out of the nine participants lacked confidence in expressing their beliefs. Additionally, seven out of the nine stated that they felt more able to express their beliefs through writing, although vocalizing those beliefs still depended on their comfort level with the people they were with.

Participant #4 responded to the question, "Do you avoid thinking about or talking about a stressful or traumatic experience?" In the pre-project questionnaire, they indicated difficulty in sharing past or present traumatic experiences. However, in the post-project questionnaire, Participant #4 wrote: "At first, yes, but our group has opened doors to talk freely about anything and everything. I feel like an open book to anyone I trust." In the pre-project questionnaire, seven out of the nine [77%] participants reported avoiding thinking or talking about a stressful or traumatic experience, while two out of the nine [23%] indicated they did not. In contrast, the post-project questionnaire revealed about the same, with only five out of the nine participants reporting that they avoided talking about a stressful or traumatic experience, while four out of the nine participants indicated they did not. One participant explained that: "I usually do avoid talking about it,

I try to deal with everything myself. With this class, I was able to open up and know I wasn't being judged."

Trust and a safe environment are essential for the effectiveness of a creative writing group as a means of self-expression, particularly when addressing past or present trauma. The insights gained from the post-project questionnaires highlighted the bond formed within the small group, which cultivated an atmosphere of vulnerability and the freedom to create, thereby opening a space for healing within the creative writing group.

One of the final questions on the post-project questionnaire asked participants to indicate how important it is to offer the arts as a ministry at Reedsville United Methodist Church. The results revealed that eight out of the nine respondents believed that providing arts programs at the church would be beneficial.

One participant expressed their thoughts by saying, "I feel that it is important to have an arts program—a space where people can come to express themselves through art. Being at the church also means they can find someone to talk to if they have any problems or concerns to address."

Another participant, who rated the importance of offering arts at the church as a level 5, stated, "I do believe offering arts is important. However, it's not something I personally pursue. If there were a program specifically for children, I strongly believe my child would participate." Despite not considering themselves an "arts" person, this participant acknowledged the benefits of having an arts ministry group within the church, especially for children and youth.

My insights were also gathered from interviewing each participant about their experience in the seven-week creative writing workshop. The overall consensus was

positive, and participants felt more confident in articulating their trauma in a small group setting through creative writing exercises. One participant remarked, "This workshop was beneficial and challenging at times, but it helped me articulate my feelings. The hardest part was the free writing, but I hope to continue writing, especially during the winter months."

Another participant expressed, "I didn't know what to expect when coming to the workshop. I can't believe I was able to open up to people I didn't know well, but after listening to others share what they wrote, I felt comfortable. I believe I can be there for others as they navigate their trauma." This participant also mentioned a desire to continue gathering with the group, as a strong fellowship developed through the shared experiences.

One participant shared, "I'm glad I did it! I had the chance to talk about things I usually don't discuss. Now, I look forward to writing for fifteen minutes every day. I use my morning journal as a way to cope with the things I tend to push away." Another, who was more reserved in the group, mentioned, "I am motivated to write more. When I write in the evenings, I often find myself writing well beyond the fifteen minutes." From these interviews, I learned that many participants intend to continue the practice of journal writing.

Throughout the interviews, the overall responses of the positive impact to one's well-being through writing proved to support my hypotheses. In closing, one participant stated that: "I will continue journaling, it was very therapeutic. I have looked back on my writing and reflected on what I wrote during the workshop. In the beginning, I was intimidated because I usually don't share my feelings, but I told things I have never

shared with anyone.” This was one of the reasons for my project, members being unable to articulate their past or present trauma. This project has proven that there is recovery through poetry.

Throughout the interviews, the overall responses indicated a positive impact on well-being through writing, which supported my hypotheses. In concluding the interviews, one participant remarked, “I will continue journaling; it was very therapeutic. I have looked back on my writing and reflected on what I wrote during the workshop. At first, I was intimidated because I usually don’t share my feelings, but I expressed things I have never shared with anyone.” This was one of the reasons for my project: to help members articulate their past or present trauma. This project has demonstrated that there is potential for recovery through poetry. This project has proven that there is recovery through poetry.

Conclusion

As a result of implementing a seven-week creative writing workshop aimed at helping members express how trauma has impacted them, I am convinced that such initiatives, particularly in rural churches where exposure to the cultural arts is limited, are both necessary and highly beneficial. Overall, the participants from Reedsville UMC who took part in the workshop on cultural arts expression gained the confidence to articulate their experiences of trauma.

The project was successful because an environment was created built on trust and transparency from the very first meeting. In a setting focused on helping survivors of family trauma share their pain, establishing trust with both the facilitator and fellow

group members is crucial. Usually, without the time constraint of a seven-week limit, building this trust could take longer. However, by sharing my own story and experiences of family trauma at the beginning, I was able to open the door for others to do the same.

Transparency is sometimes easier to achieve in writing than in spoken communication. A creative writing workshop encourages participants to engage in both forms of expression. This is why art therapy through writing is so effective. Participants write in the comfort of their own homes, using pen and paper to express themselves, and then return to class to share what they have written. Often, individuals write more than they would typically speak, which is particularly important when dealing with trauma, as it allows them to reveal hidden pain. This approach was successful in the project, enabling participants to share traumas they had not disclosed to others, most of which stemmed from childhood. Carrying past trauma into adulthood can negatively affect how individuals perceive themselves, others, and their faith. This impact was evident in their written assignments.

This project was also successful because it took place in a group setting. One participant mentioned that she felt more comfortable sharing in a group than in private therapy sessions. In creative writing groups, writers often want to share their work with others, which was evident in the writing workshop. The act of listening played a crucial role in the group dynamic; listeners were able to engage with the readings and connect emotionally to the spoken words, prompting them to reflect on their own feelings and experiences. However, I also learned that some individuals may still struggle to share their thoughts in a group setting and might need more time to feel comfortable articulating their trauma, among others.

Prayer played a vital role in the completion of this project. Before the workshop began, I prayed throughout the space where it would take place. Each meeting started and ended with prayer, and after emotional readings, prayer was particularly needed. The presence of prayer was felt in the atmosphere and among the participants throughout the entire seven-week workshop, allowing everyone to experience the comfort of the Holy Spirit and share openly and authentically. Participants also committed to praying for one another during the workshop, and they continue to do so today. In the end, it was clear that prayer not only guided the success of the project but also fostered a deep sense of unity, healing, and lasting connection among all involved.

If I had to do this project over, I would adjust the time management I initially planned for each workshop. I did not allocate enough time for individuals to share their experiences and for others to respond. I scheduled only a twenty-minute time slot for sharing written works and set the total duration of each workshop to an hour and a half. As a result, some sessions ended up lasting over two hours. I allowed each participant to share, respond, and reflect for as long as they needed, as I felt it was important not to impose a time limit when discussing trauma. In the future, I plan to structure the class differently by not having everyone read in one session. Instead, breaking it up into smaller groups that share on different days could significantly improve time management.

In conclusion, for future work, I would like to introduce a creative writing workshop in the schools of Preston County. I believe that exposing children and youth to the cultural arts and teaching them to express themselves at an early age is essential for preventing self-esteem and identity issues, particularly for those who have experienced trauma. As noted, Preston County lacks innovative recovery treatments and mental health

care, and writing has been proven to be a valuable tool for some individuals to express their pain and wounds. Although writing is not for everyone, my project demonstrated that it can be beneficial for many in expressing and sharing their trauma. Once these feelings are articulated, they can begin the healing process.

Talitha Cumi

One morning in October,
she stood sober before the rising river.
The ferry boat remained closed
all month due to high water,
and the rain kept falling
in abundance.

On the edge of two worlds,
her feet sunk into the mud
of the riverbank.
Her feet dug deep past clay,
rocks and minerals.
Her feet reached
and touched the core
of the earth—

Before the earth was formed,
when the darkness stood on the
face of the deep—
Except for one bright light that hovered
over the waters.

The river seemed not bothered
by being raised or lowered,
as an oak tree might remain silent when
approaching autumn—

There is no say in the matter.

The earth gives way
and makes room, like how a body
expands for a fetus,
like the land gives for a garden
or grave.

All month the clouds remained a grayish blue,

the sky, the sun, the moon,
waited to see which direction
she would choose.

One morning she stood sober
in the river and did not move—

As the water rose above
her knees and the rain
perfumed the air,
a scent she still breathes in today—

She reached the place of belief
in what she could not see,
she was no longer afraid of what
could be hidden underneath—

Or of the world that awaits her.⁸

My prayer is that this project will inspire readers to harness the power of the
written word to express and share their stories—stories that may only be truly revealed
through creative writing

⁸ Unpublished work written by researcher, Lisa Fox.

APPENDIX

CREATIVE WRITING TEACHING SESSIONS

Creative Writing Teaching Sessions

Week 1: Introduction.

- a) Greetings, Introductions, and Opening Prayer (15 mins)
- b) Introduction to the Study/Personal Journey/Foundation Papers (20 mins)
- c) Session One: Purpose of Journal Writing/Writing Exercise (50 mins)
- d) Break (5 mins)
- e) Administer Pre-Test Survey Questions (10 mins)
- f) Overview for Session 2 Writing Exercise: Write letter to younger self (15 mins)
- g) Reflections and Closing Prayer (5 mins)

Week 2: Biblical Foundation -- Created in the Image of God.

- a) Greetings/Check-in/Opening Prayer (15 mins)
- b) Review of Session One (15 mins)
- c) Reflection of Writing Exercise: Write a letter to one's younger self (20 mins)
- d) Break (5 mins)
- e) Session Two: Creation Story—Genesis 1[Created in Image of God] (45 mins)
- f) Overview for Session 3 Writing Exercise: Write a letter to God (15 mins)
- g) Reflections and Closing Prayer (5 mins)

Week 3: Historical Foundation – The History of Creative Writing to Express Emotions

- a) Greetings/Check-in/Opening Prayer (15 mins)
- b) Review of Session Two (15 mins)
- c) Reflection of Writing Exercise: Write a letter to God (20 mins)
- d) Break (5 mins)

e) Session Three: History of Creative Writing/Life & Work of William Cowper
(45 mins)

f) Overview for Session 4 Writing Exercise: Write about a stressful or traumatic
event (15 mins)

g) Reflections and Closing Prayer (5 mins)

Week 4: Theological Foundation – What is Theopoetics?

a) Greetings/Check-in/Opening Prayer (15 mins)

b) Review of Session Three (15 mins)

c) Reflection of Writing Exercise: Write a stressful/traumatic event (20 mins)

d) Break (5 mins)

e) Session Four: Theology of Theopoetics (45 mins)

f) Overview for Session 5 Writing Exercise: Write about a theological theme from
the Bible (20 mins)

g) Reflections and Closing Prayer (5 mins)

Week 5: Interdisciplinary Foundation – Art Therapy

a) Greetings/Check-in/Opening Prayer (15 mins)

b) Review of Session Four (15 mins)

c) Reflection of Writing Exercise: Write poem about theme from Bible (20 mins)

d) Break (5 mins)

e) Session Five: Interdisciplinary Foundations—Art Therapy (45 mins)

f) Overview for Session 6 Writing Exercise: Write about a person or event that has positively impacted one's life. (20 mins)

g) Reflections and Closing Prayer (5 mins)

Week 6: Creative Writing – The Making of a Poem

a) Greetings/Check-in/Opening Prayer (15 mins)

b) Review of Session Five (15 mins)

c) Reflection of Writing Exercise: Write about a person or event that has positively impacted one's life. (20 mins)

d) Break (5 mins)

e) Session Six: Interdisciplinary Foundations—Art Therapy (45 mins)

f) Overview for Session 7 Writing Exercise: Draft a personal poem (20 mins)

g) Reflections and Closing Prayer (5 mins)

Week 7: Reading of Written Work, Interviews, and Post-Project Questionnaire

a) Greetings/Check-in/Opening Prayer (15 mins)

b) Review of Session Six (15 mins)

c) Reflection of Writing Exercise: Draft a personal poem (20 mins)

d) Break (5 mins)

e) Session Seven: Collaborative Sharing/ Discussion and Interviews (50 mins)

f) Administer Pre-Test Survey Questions (10 mins)

g) Reflections and Closing Prayer (5 mins)

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